

Marcel Ray Duriez

Fading

Interval: 1

Hard to Let Go

Chapter: 1

Letting go

‘Technically,’ she said, gripping her tone of knowledge.
‘Simply by one little year, though.’

And I understood... if I could be sure of the expectation I required, sure that I would get to spend always with Marcel, and Olivia and the rest of the Barn’s like my little sis Kattie- may, she is on three, (willingly not as a wrinkled tiny old lady...) at that following a year or two one course or the other would not matter to me so considerably.

Then Marcel was an inanimate set corresponding to any future that changed me.

An Inconsiderable future that made me like him- that made me immortal, extravagantly.

You are protected inside your consciousness. Not one can reach you there. Or so I believed was true- until this time, I should live over and over, like the day before it, the same yet not so. A dead-end, he baptized this.

I could not see Marcel’s point, to be accurate. What was so numerous about destruction? Being an angel didn't look like such a terrible thing-not the way the Barn’s did it, nevertheless.

‘What point will you be at home?’ Olivia declared, changing the subject. Of her profile, she was up to stipulating the kind of thing I had been dreaming to elude.

'I didn't recognize I had layouts to be there.'

'Oh, be fair, Bell!' She bellowed. 'You aren't going to exhaust all our entertainment like that, are you?'

'I revived my birthday, and it was about what I demand.'

'I'll get her from Mr. Anderson's right after school, 'Marcel told her, disregarding me collectively.

'I have to work,' I complained.

'You don't, truly,' Olivia informed me smugly.

'I previously spoke to Mrs. Newton of such... She's trading your shifts. She spoke to inform you she wishes you a: 'Happy Birthday.'

'I- yet can't come over,' I resolved, clambering for an excuse. 'I, well, I mustn't watch Romeo and Juliet yet for English.'

Olivia squealed, 'You have Romeo and Juliet memorized.'

'Although Mr. Smith proclaimed, we obliged to notice it performed to thoroughly acknowledge it that's how Shakespeare intended it to be presented.'

Marcel rolled his eyes.

'You've already seen the movie,' Olivia accused.

'Although not the nineteen-sixties version. Mr. Smith said it was the best.'

Subsequently, Olivia lost the self-satisfied smile and glared at me.

‘This can be obvious, or this can be troublesome, Bell, but one way or the others-’

Marcel interrupted her threat. ‘Relax, Olivia. If Karly wants to watch a movie, then she can. It's her birthday.’

‘So there,’ I added.

‘I'll bring her over around seven,’ he continued. ‘That will give you more time to set up.’

Olivia's howling sounded again. ‘Sounds immeasurable good. See you tonight, Bell! It'll be fun, you'll see.’ She grinned-the wide smile revealed all her perfect, glistening teeth-then pecked me on the cheek and danced off moving her first class before I could respond.

‘Marcel, please’ I started to beg, but he clasped one crisp finger to my lips.

‘Let's review it later. We're going to be late for school.’

No one bothered to stare at us as we took our representative seats in the back of the classroom (we should every class together now-it was amazing the favors Marcel could get the female administrators to do for him.)

Marcel and I had been together too long now to be an object of gossip anymore. Even Lance didn't bother to give me the glum stare that used to make me feel a little guilty.

He smirked now alternatively, and I was glad he had trusted that we could only be friends.

Lance had developed over the summer-his face had lost some of the completeness, making his cheekbones more outstanding, and he was diminishing his pale blond hair a new way; alternatively, of bristly, it was exceptional and gelled into strictly inconsistent disarray.

It was simple to see where his stimulus came from- but Marcel's look wasn't something that could be delivered through imitation.

As the day continued, I contemplated ways to get out of whatever was going down at the Natalie house later.

It would be bad enough to have to celebrate when I was in the mood to mourn. Nevertheless, more dangerous than that, this was sure to involve attention and benefits.

Chapter: 2

Wishes

Mindfulness is nevermore a good thing, as any other accident-prone fumbler would accept. No one wants a floodlight when they're likely to stumble on their face.

Moreover, I would extremely pointedly be asked- well, ordered really-that no one gave me any presents this year. It seemed like Mr. Anderson and Ayanna weren't the only ones who had decided to overlook that.

I would have never had much wealth, furthermore, that had never more disturbed me. Ayanna had raised me on a kindergarten teacher's wage.

Mr. Anderson wasn't getting rich at his job, either; he was the police chief here in the tiny town of Pittsburgh.

My only personal revenue came from the four days a week I worked at the local Goodwill store. In a borough this small, I was blessed to have a career, after all the viruses in the world today having everything shut down.

Every cent I gained went into my diminutive university endowment at SNHU online.

(College transpired like nothing more than a Plan B. I was still dreaming of Plan A; however, Marcel was just so unreasonable about leaving me, mortal.)

Marcel ought to have a lot of funds I didn't even want to think about how much. Cash was involved alongside oblivion to Marcel or the rest of the Barns, like Karly saying she never had anything yet walked away with it all.

It was just something that swelled when you had extensive time on your hands and a sister who had an uncanny ability to predict trends in the stock market.

Marcel didn't seem to explain why I objected to him spending bills on me, why it made me miserable if he took me to an overpriced establishment in Los Angeles, why he wasn't allowed to buy me a car that could reach speeds over fifty miles an hour, how? I wouldn't let him pay my university tuition (he was ridiculously enthusiastic about Plan B.)

Marcel believed I was being gratuitously difficult.

Although, how could I let him give me things when I had nothing to retaliate amidst?

He, for some amazing incomprehensible understanding, wanted to be with me. Anything he gave me on top of that just propelled us more out of balance.

As the day went on, neither Marcel nor Olivia brought my birthday up again, and I began to relax a little.

Then we sat at our usual table for lunch.

An unfamiliar kind of break survived at that table. The three of us, Marcel, Olivia, including myself hunkered down on the steep southerly end of the table. Now that is 'superb' and scarier (in Emmah's case, unquestionably.)

The Natalie siblings had finished. We were gazing at them; they're so odd, Olivia and Marcel arranged not to seem quite so intimidating, and we did not sit here alone.

My other compatriots, Lance, and Mikaela (who were in the uncomfortable post-breakup association phase,) Mollie and Sam (whose involvement had endured the summertime...)

Tim, Kaylah, Skylar, and Sophie (though that last one didn't count in the friend category.)

Completely assembled at the same table, on the other side of an interchangeable line.

That line softened on sunshiny days when Marcel and Olivia continuously skipped school times before there was Karly, and then the discussion would swell out effortlessly to incorporate me.

Marcel and Olivia didn't find this minor elimination fragmentary or dangerous the way I would hold.

They scarcely noticed this at all.

Characters always felt remarkably hostile at leisure with the Barn's, around anxious for some purpose they couldn't justify to themselves.

I implied a unique exemption to that precept. Seldom confused Marcel whence very satisfied I was withstanding adjacent to him.

He deemed he was dangerous to my health-a feeling I rejected vehemently whenever he uttered that.

Midday moved briskly.

School completed, and Marcel walked me to my truck as he customarily prepared. Disregarding this time, he held the

pilgrim entrance open for me. Olivia must have obtained it using his automobile home so that he could restrain me from making a charge for this.

I wrapped my arms and performed no move to get out of the downpour. 'It's my birthday, don't I get to drive?'

'I'm faking it's not your birthday, just as you yearned.'

'If it's not my birthday, then I don't have to proceed to your home later...'

'All right,' He closed the passenger door and shuffled past me to open the driver's side. 'Happy birthday.'

'Sh-h,' I shushed him halfheartedly. I climbed through the opened door, begging he'd exercised the other suggestion.

Marcel played with the radio while I drove, shaking his head in dissatisfaction.

'Your radio has awful treatments.'

I scowled; I didn't like it when he picked on my truck. The truck was transcendent, and it had nature.

'You want a pleasant stereo? Drive your vehicle.' I was so annoyed about Olivia's plans, on top of my already discouraged feeling, that the words came out sharper than I'd anticipated them.

I was barely ever bad-tempered with Marcel, and my tone made him press his lips together to keep from smiling.

When I parked in front of Mr. Anderson's house, he stretched over to take my face in his hands.

He handled me very thoroughly, touching just the tips of his fingers softly against my temples, my cheekbones, my jawline. Like I was exceptionally breakable.

Which was specifically the case compared with him, at most limited.

‘You should be in a good mood, today of all days,’ he muttered.

His unseasoned breath crossed my face.

‘Moreover, if I don't want to be in a good mood?’ I asked, my breathing irregular.

His golden eyes smoldered. ‘Too bad.’

My head was already spinning by the time he leaned closer and pressed his icy lips against mine. As he intended, no doubt, I forgot all about my worries and concentrated on remembering how to inhale and exhale.

His mouth lingered on mine, cold, smooth, and gentle until I wrapped my arms around his neck and threw myself into the kiss with a little too much enthusiasm. I could feel his lips curve upward as he let go of my face and reached back to unlock my grip on him.

Marcel had drawn many careful lines for our physical relationship, with the intent being to keep me alive. Though I respected the need for maintaining a safe distance between my skin and his razor-sharp, venom-coated teeth, I tended to forget about trivial things like that when he was kissing me.

‘Be good, please,’ he breathed against my cheek. He pressed his lips gently to mine one more time and then pulled away, folding my arms across my stomach.

My pulse was thudding in my ears. I put one hand over my heart. It drummed hyperactivity under my palm.

‘Do you think I’ll ever get better at this?’ I wondered, mostly to myself. ‘That my heart might someday stop trying to jump out of my chest whenever you touch me?’

‘I hope not,’ he said, a bit smug.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Let’s go watch the Capulets and Montagues hack each other up, all right?’

‘Your wish, my command.’

Marcel sprawled on the couch while I started the movie, fast-forwarding through the opening credits.

When I perched on the edge of the sofa in front of him, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest. It wasn’t exactly as comfortable as a sofa cushion would be, what with his chest being hard and cold-and perfect-as an ice sculpture, but it was preferable. He pulled the old afghan off the back of the couch and draped it over me, so I wouldn’t freeze beside his body.

‘You know, I’ve never had much patience with Romeo,’ he commented as the movie started.

‘What’s wrong with Romeo?’ I asked, a little offended. Romeo was one of my favorite fictional characters. Until I’d met Marcel, I’d had a thing for him.

‘Well, first, he’s in love with this Rosaline-don’t you think it makes him seem a little fickle? And then, a few minutes after their wedding, he kills Juliet’s cousin. That’s not very brilliant. Mistake after mistake. Could he have destroyed his happiness any more thoroughly?’

I sighed. ‘Do you want me to watch this alone?’

‘No, I’ll mostly be watching you, anyway.’ His fingers traced patterns across the skin of my arm, raising goosebumps. ‘Will you cry?’

‘Probably,’ I admitted, ‘if I’m paying attention.’

‘I won’t distract you then.’ But I felt his lips on my hair, and it was very distracting.

The movie eventually captured my interest, thanks in large part to Marcel whispering Romeo’s lines in my ear—his irresistible, velvet voice made the actor’s voice sound weak and coarse by comparison. And I did cry, to his amusement, when Juliet woke and found her new husband dead.

‘I’ll admit, I do sort of envy him here,’ Marcel said, drying the tears with a lock of my hair.

‘She’s very pretty.’

He made a disgusted sound. ‘I don’t envy him the girl—just the ease of the suicide,’ he clarified in a teasing tone. ‘You humans have it so easy! All you must do is throw down one tiny vial of plant extracts...’ ‘What?’ I gasped.

‘It’s something I had to think about once, and I knew from Chiaz’s experience that it wouldn’t be simple. I’m not even sure how many ways Chiaz tried to kill himself in the beginning... after he realized what he’d become...’ His voice, which had grown serious, turned light again. ‘And he’s still in excellent health.’

I twisted around so that I could read his face. ‘What are you talking about?’

I demanded. ‘What do you mean, this something you had to think about once?’

‘Last spring when you were... nearly killed...’ He paused to take a deep breath, snuggling to return to his teasing tone. ‘Of course, I was trying to focus on finding you alive, but part of my mind was making contingency plans. As I said, it's not as easy for me as it is for a human.’

For one second, the memory of my last trip to Phoenix washed over my head and made me feel dizzy. I could see it all so clearly-the the blinding sun, the heat waves coming off the concrete as I ran with desperate haste to find the sadistic angel who wanted to torture me to death. James, waiting in the mirrored room with my mother as his hostage-or so I'd thought. I hadn't known it was all a ruse. Just as James hadn't known that Marcel was racing to save me; Marcel made it in time, but it had been a close one. Unthinkingly, my fingers traced the crescent-shaped scar on my hand that was always just a few degrees cooler than the rest of my skin.

I shook my head as if I could shake away the bad memories and tried to grasp what Marcel meant. My stomach plunged uncomfortably. ‘Contingency plans?’ I repeated.

‘Well, I wasn't going to live without you.’ He rolled his eyes as if that fact were childishly obvious. ‘But I wasn't sure how to do it- I knew Emmah and Joh would never help... so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Ministry.’

I didn't want to believe he was serious, but his golden eyes were brooding, focused on something far away in the distance as he contemplated ways to end his own life. Abruptly, I was furious.

‘What is Vulture?’ I demanded.

‘The Ministry is a family,’ he explained, his eyes still remote. ‘An incredibly old, immensely powerful family of our

kind. They are the closest thing our world has to a royal family, I suppose. Chiaz lived with them briefly in his early years, in Italy, before he settled in America-do you remember the story?’

‘Of course, I remember.’

I would never forget the first time I'd gone to his home, the huge white mansion buried deep in the forest beside the river, or the room where Chiaz Marcel's father in so many real ways-kept a wall of paintings that illustrated his personal history. The most vivid, most wildly colorful canvas there, the largest, was from Chiaz's time in Italy.

Of course, I remembered the calm quartet of men, each with the exquisite face of a seraph, painted into the highest balcony overlooking the swirling mayhem of color. Though the painting was centuries old, Chiaz-the blond angel-remained unchanged. And I remembered the three others, Chiaz's early acquaintances. Marcel had never used the name Ministry for the beautiful trio, two black-haired, one snow white. He'd called them Aron, Caius, and Marcellus, nighttime patrons of the arts...

‘Anyway, you don't irritate the vulture, ‘Marcel went on, interrupting ray reverie. ‘Not unless you want to die-or whatever it is we do.’ His voice was so calm, it made him sound almost bored by the prospect.

My anger turned to horror. I took his marble face between my hands and held it very tightly.

‘You must never, never, never think of anything like that again!’ I spoke. ‘No matter what might ever happen to me, you are not allowed to hurt yourself!’

‘I'll never put you in danger again, so it's a moot point.’

‘Put me in danger! I thought we'd established that all the bad luck is my fault?’ I was getting angrier. ‘How dare you

even think like that?' The idea of Marcel ceasing to exist, even if I were dead, was impossibly painful.

'What would you do if the situation were reversed?' He asked.

'That's not the same thing.'

He didn't seem to understand the difference. He chuckled.

'What if something did happen to you?' I blanched at the thought. 'Would you want me to go off myself?'

A trace of pain touched his perfect features.

'I guess I see your point... a little,' he admitted. 'But what would I do without you?'

'Whatever you were doing before I came along and complicated your existence.'

He sighed. 'You make that sound so easy.'

'It should be. I'm not that interesting.'

He was about to argue, but then he let it go. 'Moot point,' he reminded me. Abruptly, he pulled himself up into a more formal posture, shifting me to the side so that we were no longer touching.

'Mr. Anderson?' I guessed.

Marcel smiled. After a moment, I heard the police cruiser pulling into the driveway. I reached out and took his hand firmly. My dad could deal with that much.

Mr. Anderson came in with a pizza box in his hands.

‘Hey, kids.’ He grinned at me. ‘I thought you'd like a break from cooking and washing dishes for your birthday. Hungry?’

‘Sure. Thanks, Dad.’

Mr. Anderson didn't mention Marcel's obvious lack of appetite. He was used to Marcel passing on dinner.

‘Do you mind if I borrow Karly for the evening?’ Marcel asked when Mr. Anderson and I were done.

I saw it at Mr. Anderson. He had some concept of birthdays as stay-at-home, family affairs-this was my first birthday with him, the first birthday since my mom, Ayanna had remarried and gone to live in Amelia Island, so I didn't know what he would expect.

‘That's fine-the Navigators are playing the Sox tonight,’ Mr. Anderson explained, and my hope disappeared. ‘Accordingly, I won't be any kind of partnership... Hereabouts.’ He scooped up the camera he'd gotten me on Ayanna's scheme (because I would need pictures to fill up my scrapbook,) furthermore threw it to me.

He ought to know better than That-I'd always been coordinatively questioned. The camera brushed off the tip of my finger and tumbled toward the floor. Marcel snagged it before it could collapse onto the Congoleum.

‘Nice save,’ Mr. Anderson noted. ‘If they're doing something fun at the Barn's later, Bell, you should take some pictures. You know how your mother gets she'll be wanting to see the pictures faster than you can take them.’

‘Good idea, Mr. Anderson,’ Marcel said, handing me the camera.

Chapter: 3

Pictures

I turned the camera on Marcel and snapped the first picture. 'It works.'

'That's immeasurable. Hey, say hi to Olivia for me. She hasn't been over for a while.' Mr. Anderson's mouth pulled down at one corner.

'It's been three days, Dad,' I mentioned to him. Mr. Anderson was crazy regarding Olivia. He'd converted last maybe if she'd helped me through my cumbersome convalescence; Mr. Anderson would be forever beholden to her for saving him from the horror of an almost-adult daughter which required help showering. 'I'll tell her.'

'Okay, all youngsters have fun later.' It was a dismissal. Mr. Anderson was already edging toward the living room, furthermore the TV.

Marcel beamed, champion, and took my hand to pull me from the kitchen.

When we got to the truck, he opened the passenger door for me again, and this time I didn't argue.

I still had a tough time finding the obscure turnoff to his house at nightfall.

Marcel drove north within Pittsburgh, visibly chafing at the speed limit required by my ancient Chevy.

The engine groaned even louder than usual as he pushed it over fifty.

'Take it easy,' I warned him, I say.

‘You know what you would love? A nice little couple. Incredibly quiet, lots of power...’

‘There's nothing wrong with my truck. And speaking of expensive nonessentials, if you know what's good for you, you didn't spend any money on birthday presents.’

‘Not a dime,’ he replied virtuously.

‘Satisfying.’

‘Can you do me a kindness?’

‘That depends on what it is.’

He sighed- his lovely face serious. ‘Bell, the last real birthday any of us had was Emmah in 1934. Cut us a little slack, and don't be too ambitious later. They're all deeply passionate.’

It always surprised me a little when he brought up stuff like that. ‘Exceptional, I'll act.’

‘I probably should warn you...’

‘Delighted.’

‘When I say they're all excited... I do mean all of them.’

‘Everyone?’ I gasped. ‘I thought Emmah and Rose were in Cape Verde.’

The rest of Pittsburgh was under the hypothesis that the older Barn's had gone off to college this year, to Dartmouth, but I knew better. ‘Emmah wanted to be here.’

‘Nevertheless... Rose?’

‘I know, Bell, like don't disturb, she'll be on her most vigorous behavior.’

I didn't answer. Like I could simply not despair, that straightforwardly. Unlike Olivia, Marcel's other 'adopted' sister, the golden blond and lovely Rose didn't like me much.

The feeling was a little bit stronger than just an objection. As far as Rose was concerned, I was an undesirable intruder into her family's mysterious behavior.

I felt guilty about the present circumstances, suggesting that Rose and Emmah's continued absence was my responsibility, also as I furtively relished not having to see Emmah, Marcel's playful bear of a brother, I did miss.

He was in many ways just like the elder brother I would always want... only much, much stronger and to be terrifying.

Marcel decided to change the question.

'Therefore, if you won't let me get you the Cadillac, isn't there anything that you'd like for your birthday?'

The messages spread out in a disclosure. 'You know what I want.'

A profound frown carved creases into his marble forehead. He wished he'd stuck to the subject of Rose.

It felt like we'd had this argument a lot today.

'Not tonight, Bell, please.'

'Well, maybe Olivia will give me what I want.'

Marcel growled a deep, menacing sound. 'This isn't going to be your last birthday, Bell,' he promised. 'That's not fair!'

I thought I heard his teeth clench together.

We were pulling up to the house now. A bright light shines from every window on the first two floors. An extended line of gleaming Chinese lanterns hung from the porch eaves, reflecting a soft radiance on the huge cedars that surrounded the house. Big bowls of flower-pink roses lined the wide stairs up to the front doors.

I moaned...

Marcel took a few deep inhalations to tranquilize himself. 'This is a party,' he reminded me. 'Try to be a good sport.'

'Certainly,' I muttered...

He came around to get to my door and offered me his hand.

'I have a question.'

He waited warily.

'If I develop this film,' I said, toying with the camera in my hands, 'will you show up in the film?'

Marcel started laughing. He helped me out of the car, pulled me up the stairs, and was still laughing as he opened the door for me.

They were all set in the huge white living room; when I walked through the door, they greeted me with a loud chorus of 'Happy birthday, Bell!' while I blushed and looked down. Olivia, I assumed, had covered every flat surface with pink candles and dozens of crystal bowls filled with hundreds of roses. There was a table with a white cloth draped over it next to Marcel's grand piano, holding a pink birthday cake, more roses, a stack of glass plates, and a small pile of gold-wrapped gifts.

It was a hundred times worse than I'd imagined.

Marcel, sensing my distress, wrapped an encouraging arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head.

Marcel's parents, Chiaz and Esme-impossibly youthful and lovely as everywhere the closest to the door. Esme hugged me carefully, her soft, caramel-colored hair brushing against my cheek as she kissed my forehead, and then Chiaz put his arm around my shoulders.

'Sorry about this, Bell,' he stage-whispered. 'We couldn't rein Olivia in.'

Rose and Emmah attained behind them. Rose didn't smile, but at least she didn't frown. Emmah's face was stretched into a huge grin. It had been months following,

I'd seen them; I'd forgotten how gloriously wonderful Rose was-it almost hurt to look at her. And had Emmah always been so... consequential?

'You haven't changed at all,' Emmah said with mock disappointment. 'I expected a perceptible difference, but here you are, red-faced just like always.'

'Thanks a lot, Emmah,' I said, blushing deeper.

He laughed, 'I have to step out for a second'-he paused to wink conspicuously at Olivia-'don't do anything funny while I'm gone.'

'I'll try.'

Olivia let go of Joh's hand and skipped forward, all her teeth sparkling in the bright light. Joh grinned, too, but kept his distance. He pitched long and blond-haired people upon the post at the foot of the stairs. Throughout the days we'd had to spend cooped up together in California, I'd thought he'd gotten over his aversion to me. But he'd gone back to exactly how he'd

acted before avoiding me as much as possible the moment he was free from that transient responsibility to shield me. I knew it wasn't personal, just a precaution, and I tried not to be overly sensitive about it. Joh had more struggle attaching to the Barn's diet than the rest of them; the scent of human blood was much harder for him to resist than the others he hadn't been trying as long.

'Time to open presents,' Olivia declared. She put her cool hand under my elbow and towed me to the table with the cake and the sparkling cases.

I put on my best scapegoat face. 'Olivia, I know I told you I didn't want anything.'

'However, I didn't listen,' she interrupted, smug. 'Open it.' She took the camera from my hands and replaced it with a big, old-fashioned grayish crate.

The case was so light that it felt empty. The card on top declared that it was from Emmah, Rose, and Joh. Self-consciously, I tore the paper off and then stared at the box concealed.

It was something electrical, with lots of numbers in the name. I opened the box, hoping for further illumination. But the box was empty.

'Um... gratitude.'

Rose cracked a smile. Joh laughed. 'It's a stereo for your truck,' he explained. 'Emmah's installing it right now so that you can't return it.'

Olivia was always one step ahead of me. 'Thanks, Joh, Rose,' I told them, grinning as I retained Marcel's complaints about my radio this afternoon all a setup. 'Thanks, Emmah!' I called more loudly.

I heard his booming laugh from my truck, and I couldn't help laughing, too.

'Open mine and Marcel's next,' Olivia said, so excited her voice was a high-pitched trill. She held a small, flat square in her hand.

I turned to give Marcel a basilisk glare. 'You promised.'

Ere he could respond, Emmah ricocheted through the doorway. 'Just in time!' She crowed. she pushed in behind Joh, who had also drifted closer than usual to get a good look.

'I didn't spend a dime,' Marcel assured me. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, leaving my skin tingling from his touch.

I breathed sincerely and turned to Olivia. 'Give it to me,' I sighed.

Emmah smiled with pleasure.

I took the little package, rolling my eyes at Marcel while I stuck my finger under the edge of the paper and jerked it under the tape.

'Gauntlet,' I muttered when the paper sliced my finger; I pulled it out to examine the damage. A single drop of blood leaked from the miniature construction.

It all appeared very quickly then.

'No! 'Marcel shouted.

He threw himself at me, flinging me back across the table. It fell, as I did, scattering the cake and the presents, the blossoms, and the silverware. I landed in the mess of shattered crystal.

Joh pushed into Marcel, and the quality was like the crash of fieldstones in a rockslide.

There was another vibration, a grisly snarling that was beginning from deep in Joh's ribs. Joh tried to shove past Marcel, snapping his teeth just inches from Marcel's face.

Emmah grabbed Joh from behind in the next instant, locking him into his massive steel grip, but Joh struggled on, his wild, hollow eyes concentrated only on me.

Surpassing the shock, there was also pain. I had fallen to the floor by the keyboard, with my arms thrown out intuitively to catch my fall, into the jagged shards of glass. Only now did I feel the searing, stinging endeavor that poured from my wrist to the crease inside my elbow.

Unconscious and disoriented, I looked up from the bright red blood pulsing out of my arm into the fevered eyes of the six swiftly voracious angels.

Chapter: 4

Part: 1 July

This is one more example of where I remember these days.

Photos online, and cam videos all that are my memories- of me to others.

Part: 2 August

Compare... them then and now- naked slut girl or 1940s modesty.

I remember having the old photo album spread out on the bedroom floor.

Oh! Wow! Look at this one... do you like how she was remembered better than me?

(Photo)

Part: 3

It's- September

More of the same- I have become a cam-whore!!!
Nothing more...

Part: 4

OCTOBER

...And yah- a, ah- pics that would make you blush, and hard, you boys would love to see me, now, wouldn't you?

Part: 5

NOVEMBER

Making cummie videos is my life.

Part: 6

DECEMBER

Coming 7 hours out of the day is taking time away from other things.

Part: 7

WAKING UP

...After fraping till- I passed out all hot gross and sweaty, I did not remember falling asleep- with mom and dad- sis and the world seeing me as my door to my trashed bedroom- all jammed open- and's- and's- AND'S- did not care at this point. (SAY IT WITH exhausted SLURRING.)

JANUARY yet how- ga-gives- a _____.

Ef...

E- un- mm- ah- in-n...

Whatever...

I am making 50 Gs in a night... so that makes it okay.

(A photo of me lying in bed with all this money!)

Part: 8

TIME PASSES

Craziness... look at my life here... all board...

'I am home,' I mumbled, confused- not even more.

'What did I do?' I felt my face wrinkle. It was so unfair.

My behavior... here is wow...

After that first week... of doing this...

How do I look... which neither of us ever mentioned
what we do?

I didn't miss a day of school or work.

My grades were perfect.

Yet this show is all going to shit- no?

This is what I did here... showing everything that makes
me a girl!

Now I am passing down- to her- yah me- is it wrong? I
must live with it.

#- A cam video and all these photos of her online now are worth 1,000 words! #-0-okay then what does this one says then?

My little sis- and she is frapping harder than I do- in this- damn, she is my Minnie me! She started younger than me even- yet that is all girls, her age.

Here is one with her dressed wow seem weird to see her with something on anymore-

(Swipe- and the phone in your hand would make a click sound...)

Oh, this one-

She loves these beautiful white lace kid's girls' shorts- so girly- girly- from Wal-Mart, yet she was banned from wearing them in school without anything under them, yet I look around and all other girls do it.

Yet, on Facebook- and Instagram 1, you get one persona and on Google images a whole other- just like Snapchat you have her as your girlfriend for the night yet have- yet she is your striptease only- and the other Instagram- that grammar should never- ever see- yet this is how to get popular- and stay popular.

Besides then there is the community of internet nudists- on MFC. And the profile- she now has too, a legacy to be remembered by, no? Yet, when you have no education to speak of and working for some d*ck head is just out of the question, over they think you're not worthy of their time- were you're not making anything, and at this point in Pa she too young to work, yet is old enough to have unprotected sex... Um- and then I wonder- yet she needs the money- for school coming up because your mommy and daddy don't have it, and all for

fun, boys, and a girl's night of fun- and partying- and being crazy. Money is everything... and why girls do what they must do...

Part: 9

Penetrating

'Her residence, 'Marcel said, his husky voice low and intense.

Someone answered, and Marcel altered in an instant. He straightened up, and his hand dropped from my face. His eyes went flat, his face blank, and I would have bet the measly remainder of my college fund and that it was Olivia.

I recovered myself and held out my hand for the phone. Marcel ignored me. 'He's not here, 'Marcel said, and the words were menacing.

There was some noticeably short reply, a request for more information it seemed because he added unwillingly, 'He's at the funeral.'

Then Marcel hung up the phone. 'Filthy bloodsucker,' he muttered under his breath. The face he turned back to me was the bitter mask again.

'Who did you just hang up on?' I gasped, infuriated. 'In my house, and on my phone?'

'Easy! He hung up on me!'

'He? Who was it?'

He sneered at the title. 'Dr. Chiaz Natalie.'

'Why didn't you let me talk to him?!'

‘He didn't ask for you,’ Marcel said coldly. His face was smooth, expressionless, but his hands shook. ‘He asked where Mr. Anderson was, and I told him. I don't think I broke any rules of etiquette.’

‘You listen to me, Marcel Black-’

But he wasn't listening. He looked quickly over his shoulder as if someone had called his name from the other room. His eyes went wide and his body stiff, then he started trembling. I listened too, automatically, but heard nothing.

‘Bye, bells,’ he spits out and wheeled toward the front door.

I ran after him. ‘What is it?’

And then I ran into him, as he rocked back on his heels, cursing under his breath. He spun around again, knocking me sideways. I bobbed and fell to the floor, my legs tangled with his.

‘Shoot, now!’ I protested as he hurriedly jerked his legs free one at a time.

I struggled to pull myself up as he darted for the back door; he suddenly froze again.

Olivia stood motionless at the foot of the stairs.

‘Bell,’ she choked.

I scrambled to my feet and lurched to her side. Her eyes were dazed and far away, her face drawn and whiter than bone. Her slim body trembled to an inner turmoil.

‘Olivia, what's wrong?’ I cried. I put my hands on her face, trying to calm her.

Her eyes focused on mine abruptly, wide with pain.

‘Marcel,’ was all she whispered.

My body reacted faster than my mind was able to catch up with the implications of her reply. I didn't at first understand why the room was spinning or where the hollow roar in my ears was coming from. My mind labored, unable to make sense of Olivia's bleak face and how it could relate to Marcel, while my body was already swaying, seeking the relief of unconsciousness before reality could hit me.

The stairway tilted at the oddest angle.

Marcel's furious voice was suddenly in my ear, hissing out a stream of profanities. I felt vague disapproval. His new friends were a bad influence.

I was on the couch without understanding how I got there, and Marcel was still swearing. It felt like there was an earthquake-the couch was shaking under me.

‘What did you do to her?’ He demanded.

Olivia ignored him. ‘Bell? Bell, snap out of it. We must hurry.’

‘Stay back,’ Marcel warned.

‘Calm down, Marcel Black,’ Olivia ordered. ‘You don't want to do that so close to her.’

‘I don't think I'll have any problem keeping my focus,’ he retorted, but his voice sounded a little cooler.

‘Olivia?’ My voice was weak. ‘What happened?’ I asked, even though I didn't want to hear.

‘I don't know,’ she suddenly wailed. ‘What is he thinking?!’

I labored to pull myself up despite the dizziness. I realized it was Marcel's arm I was gripping for balance. He was the one shaking, not the couch.

Olivia was pulling a small silver phone from her bag when my eyes relocated to her. Her fingers dialed the numbers so fast they were a blur.

'Rose, I need to talk to Chiaz now.' Her voice whipped through the words. 'Fine, as soon as he's back. No, I'll be on a plane. Look, have you heard anything from Marcel?'

Olivia paused now, listening with an expression that grew more appalled every second. Her mouth opened into a little O of horror, and the phone shook in her hand.

'Why?' she gasped. 'Why would you do that, Rose?'

Whatever the answer was, it made her jaw tighten in anger. Her eyes flashed and narrowed.

'Well, you're wrong on both counts, though, Rose, so that would be a problem, don't you think?' she asked acidly. 'Yes, that's right. She's fine- I was wrong... It's a long story... But you're wrong about that part, too, that's why I'm calling... Yes, that's exactly what I saw.'

Olivia's voice was extremely hard, and her lips were pulled back from her teeth. 'It's a bit late for that, Rose. Save your remorse for someone who believes it.' Olivia snapped the phone shut with a sharp twist of her fingers.

Her eyes were tortured as she turned to face me.

'Olivia,' I blurted out quickly. I couldn't let her speak yet. I needed a few more seconds before she spoke, and her words destroyed what was left of my life.

'Olivia, Chiaz is back, though. He called just before...'

She stared at me blankly. 'How long ago?' she asked in a hollow voice.

'Half a minute before you showed up.'

'What did he say?' She focused now, waiting for my answer.

'I didn't talk to him.' My eyes flickered to Marcel.

Olivia turned her penetrating gaze on him. He flinched but held his place next to me. He sits awkwardly as if he were trying to shield me with his body.

'He asked for Mr. Anderson, and I told him Mr. Anderson wasn't here,' Marcel muttered resentfully.

'Is that everything?' Olivia demanded, her voice like ice.

'Then he hung up on me,' Marcel spit back. A tremor rolled down his spine, shaking me with it.

'You told him Mr. Anderson was at the funeral,' I reminded him.

Olivia jerked her head back toward me 'What were his exact words?'

'He said, 'He's not here,' and when Chiaz asked where Mr. Anderson was, Marcel said, 'At the funeral.'"

Olivia moaned and sank to her knees.

'Tell me, Olivia,' I whispered.

'That wasn't Chiaz on the phone,' she said hopelessly.

'Are you calling me a liar?' Marcel snarled from beside me.

Olivia ignored him, focusing on my bewildered face.

‘It was Marcel.’ The words were just a choked whisper. ‘He thinks you’re dead.’

My mind started to work again. These words weren’t the ones I’d been afraid of, and the relief cleared my head.

‘Rose told him I killed myself, didn’t she?’ I said, sighing as I relaxed. ‘Yes,’ Olivia admitted, her eyes flashing hard again.

‘In her defense, she did believe it. They rely on my sight far too much for something that works so imperfectly. But for her to track him down to tell him this! Didn’t she realize... or care...?’ Her voice faded away in horror.

‘And when Marcel called here, he thought Marcel meant my funeral,’ I realized. It stung to know how close I’d been, just inches away from his voice. My nails dug into Marcel’s arm, but he didn’t flinch.

Olivia looked at me strangely. ‘You’re not upset,’ she whispered.

‘Well, it’s rotten timing, but it will all get straightened out. The next time he calls, someone will tell him... what... really...’ I trailed off. Her gaze strangled the words in my throat.

Why was she so panicked? Why was her face twisting now with pity and horror? What was it she had said to Rose on the phone just now? Something about what she’d seen... and Rose’s remorse; Rose would never feel remorse for anything that happened to me. But if she’d hurt her family, hurt her brother...

‘Bell,’ Olivia whispered. ‘Marcel won’t call again. He believed her.’

'I. Don't. Understand.' My mouth framed each word in silence. I couldn't push the air out to say the words that would make her explain what that meant.

'He's going to Italy.'

It took the length of one heartbeat for me to comprehend.

When Marcel's voice came back to me now, it was not the perfect imitation of my delusions. It was just the weak, flat tone of my memories. But the words alone were enough to shred through my chest and leave it gaping open. Words from a time when I would have bet everything that I owned or could borrow on the fact that he loved me.

Well, I wasn't going to live without you, he'd said as we watched Romeo and Juliet die, here in this very room. But I wasn't sure how to do it. I knew Emmah and Joh would never help... so I was thinking I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Ministry... You don't irritate them. Not unless you want to die.

Not unless you want to die.

'NO!' The half-shrieked denial was so loud after the whispered words, it made us all jump. I felt the blood rushing to my face as I realized what she'd seen. 'No! No, no, no! He can't! He can't do that!'

'He made up his mind as soon as your friend confirmed that it was too late to save you.'

'But he... he left! He didn't want me anymore! What difference does it make now? He knew I would die sometime!'

'I don't think he ever planned to outlive you by long,' Olivia said quietly.

‘How dare he!’ I screamed. I was on my feet now, and Marcel rose uncertainly to put himself between Olivia and me again.

‘Oh, get out of the way, Marcel!’ I elbowed my way around his trembling body with desperate impatience. ‘What do we do?’ I begged Olivia. There had to be something. ‘Can't we call him? Can Chiaz?’

She was shaking her head. ‘That was the first thing I tried. He left his phone in a trash can in Rio-someone answered it...’ she whispered.

‘You said before we had to hurry. Hurry how? Let's do it, whatever it is!’

‘Bell, I-I don't think I can ask you to...’ She trailed off in indecision.

‘Ask me!’ I commanded.

She put her hands on my shoulders, holding me in place, her fingers flexing sporadically to emphasize her words. ‘We may already be too late. I saw him going to the Ministry... and asking to die.’ We both cringed, and my eyes were suddenly blind. I blinked feverishly at the tears. ‘It all depends on what they choose. I can't see that until they decide.

‘But if they say no, and they might-Aron is fond of Chiaz, and wouldn't want to offend him- Marcel has a backup plan. They're very protective of their city. If Marcel does something to upset the peace, he thinks they'll act to stop him. And he's right. They will.’

I stared at her with my jaw clenched in frustration. I'd heard nothing yet that would explain why we were still standing here.

'So- if they agree to grant his favor, we're too late. If they say no, and he comes up with a plan to offend them quickly enough, we're too late. If he gives in to his more theatrical tendencies... we might have time.'

'Let's go!'

'Listen, Bell! Whether we are on time or not, we will be in the heart of the Ministry city. I will be considered his accomplice if he is successful. You will be a human who not only knows too much but also smells too good. There's a particularly good chance that they will eliminate us all-though in your case it won't be punishment so much as dinnertime.'

'This is what's keeping us here?' I asked in disbelief. 'I'll go alone if you're afraid.' I mentally tabulated what money was left in my account and wondered if Olivia would lend me the rest.

'I'm only afraid of getting you killed.'

I snorted in disgust. 'I almost get myself killed daily! Tell me what I need to do!' 'You write a note to Mr. Anderson. I'll call the airlines.'

'Mr. Anderson,' I gasped.

Not that my presence was protecting him, but could I leave him here alone to face...

'I'm not going to let anything happen to Mr. Anderson.' Marcel's deep voice was gruff and angry. 'Screw the treaty.'

I glanced up at him, and he scowled at my panicked expression.

~*~

'Rush, Bell,' Olivia intervened enthusiastically.

I ran to the kitchen, dragging the drawers apart and submitting the contents all over the floor as I hunted for a pen.

A smooth, coffee-colored handheld one was out to me.

‘Thanks,’ I grumbled, picking the cap off with my teeth. He wordlessly handed me the pad of paper we wrote phone messages on. I tore off the top sheet and threw it over my shoulder.

Dad, I penned. I’m with Olivia. Marcel’s in crisis. You can’t ground me when I get back. I grasp it’s a critical time.

So-o sorrowful.

I love you so much. Bell...?

‘Don’t go,’ Marcel murmured. The anger was all concluded now that Olivia was out of sight.

I continued to waste time arguing with him. ‘Please, please, take care of Mr. Anderson,’ I said as I hurled back out to the room. Olivia was waiting in the doorway with a bag over her shoulder.

‘Take your wallet-you’ll need an ID. Please notify me you have a passport. I don’t have time to forget one.’

I nodded and then raced up the stairs, my knees weak with gratitude that my mother had wanted to marry Phil on a beach in Hawaii.

Of course, like all her plans, it had fallen through. However not before I’d made all the functional arrangements I could for her.

I shredded through my room. I packed my old pocketbook, a plain T-shirt, and sweatpants into my backpack, and then threw my toothbrush on top.

I hurled myself back down the stairs. The sense of Deja vu was nearly stifling by this duration. At least, unlike the last time when I would run away from Pittsburgh to escape thirsty angels rather than to find Them-I wouldn't have to say goodbye to Mr. Anderson in person.

Marcel and Olivia were locked in an encounter in front of the open door, occupying so far apart you wouldn't believe at first that they were having a dialogue. Neither one resembled to notice my boisterous reappearance.

'You might restrain yourself on occasion, but these bloodsuckers you're taking her to-' Marcel was furiously challenging her.

Part: 10

Puzzlement

She glared in bewilderment. 'Someone uprooted you out?'

'Yes. Marcel protected me.'

I accepted curiously as an enigmatic range of changes flashed across her face. Was something troubling her, wrong reasoning? Though I wasn't certain. Then she purposely leaned in and inhaled my arm.

I stopped at that moment at that time in that place I was.

'Don't be laughable,' she whispered, inhaling at me some further.

'What are you preparing?'

She neglected my problem. 'Who was with you out there just now? It sounded like you were battling.'

‘Marcel.’

‘He’s... the variety of my best friend, I assume. At least, he was...’ I considered Marcel’s mad, frustrated face, and questioned what he was to me now.

Olivia nodded, appearing preoccupied.

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‘Whichever...?’

‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘I’m not positive about what it imports.’

‘Well, I’m not dead, at most invisible.’

She circled her eyes. ‘He was a fool to think you could endure simply. I’ve never more witnessed anyone so prone to life-threatening stupidity.’

‘I remained,’ I tended out.

She believed in something different. ‘So, if the currents were too much for you, how did this Marcel manage?’

‘Marcel is... compelling.’

She heard the hesitation in my communication, and her eyebrows raised.

I nibbled on my lip for a moment. Was this a secret, or not? Besides, if it was, then who was my most distinguished loyalty to?

Marcel, or Olivia?

It was too hard to keep secrets, I decided. Marcel knew everything, why not Olivia, additionally?

‘Observe, well, he's... sort of a lycanthrope,’ I announced in a dash. ‘The Quileute converts into gourmands when angels are encircling. They have known Chiaz a long time before.’

Continued with Chiaz back then?’ Olivia rubbernecked at me for a moment, and then recovered herself, blinking immediately. ‘Well, I guess that explains the smell,’ she muttered. ‘But does it explain what I didn't see?’ She frowned, her porcelain forehead creasing.

‘The smell?’ I reproduced.

‘You smell awful,’ she said absently, still scowling. ‘A lycanthrope? Are you positive about such?’

‘Very certain,’ I declared, wincing as I cherished Paul and Marcel fighting on the road. ‘I imagine you weren't with Chiaz the last time there were lycanthropes here in Pittsburgh?’

‘Neither. I hadn't discovered him yet.’ Olivia was still lost in thought. Abruptly, her eyes increased, and she turned to stare at me with a dismayed character. ‘Your best friend is a lycanthrope?’

I drowsed sheepishly.

‘How long has this been going on?’

‘Non-long,’ I answered, my call sounding frustrating. ‘He's only been a lycanthrope for just several weeks.’

She scowled at me. ‘A young lycanthrope?’

Even worse! Marcel was right, you are an electromagnet for exposure.

Weren't you assumed to be visiting out of the problem?’

‘There's nothing wrong with lycanthropes,’ I grunted, stung by her critical tone.

‘Continuously they misplace their sturdiness.’ She shook her head distinctly from side to side. ‘Leave it to you, Bell.

Anyone else would be better off when the angels left town. But you must start hanging out with the first monsters you can find.’

I did not want to argue with Olivia- I was still trembling with pleasure that she was here, that I could touch her marble skin and hear the wind-chime voice-but she had it all wrong.

‘No, Olivia, the angels didn't leave-not all of them, anyway. That is the whole trouble. If it were not for the lycanthropes, Maggie would have gotten me by now. Well, if it weren't for Maggie and his friends, Sophiet would have gotten me before she could, I guess, so-’

‘Maggie?’ She hissed. ‘Sophiet?’

~\*~

I nodded a teensy bit alarmed by the expression in her black eyes. I pointed at my chest. ‘Danger magnets remember?’

She shook her head again. ‘Tell me everything-start at the beginning.’

I glossed over the beginning, skipping the motorcycles and the voices, but telling her everything else right up to today's misadventure. Olivia did not like my thin explanation about boredom and the cliffs, so I hurried on to the strange flame I had seen on the water and what I thought it meant. Her eyes narrowed to slits at that part. It was strange to see her look so... so dangerous-like angel. I swallowed hard and went on with the rest of Harry.

She listened to my story without interrupting. Occasionally, she would shake her head, and the crease in her forehead deepened until it looked like it was carved permanently into the marble of her skin. She didn't speak and, finally, I felt quiet, struck again by the borrowed grief at Harry's passing. I thought of Mr. Anderson; he would be home soon. What condition would he be in?

'Our leaving didn't do you any good at all, did it?' Olivia murmured.

I laughed once-it was a slightly hysterical sound. 'That was never the point, though, was it? It's not like you left for my benefit.'

Olivia scowled on the floor for a moment. 'Well... I guess I acted impulsively today. I shouldn't have intruded.'

I could feel the blood draining from my face. My stomach dropped. 'Don't go, Olivia,' I whispered. My fingers locked around the collar of her white shirt, and I began to hyperventilate. 'Please don't leave me.'

Her eyes opened wider. 'All right,' she said, enunciating each word with slow precision. 'I'm not going anywhere tonight. Take a deep breath.'

I tried to obey, though I could not locate my lungs.

She watched my face while I concentrated on my breathing. She waited till I was calmer to comment. 'You look like hell, Bell.'

'I drowned today,' I reminded her.

'It goes deeper than that. You're a mess.'

I flinched. 'Look, I'm doing my best.'



'What do you mean?'

'It hasn't been easy. I'm working on it.'

She frowned. 'I told him,' She said to herself.

'Olivia,' I sighed. 'What did you think you were going to find? I mean, besides me dead. Did you expect to find me skipping around and whistling show tunes? You know me better than that.'

'I do... But I hoped.'

'Then, I guess I don't have the corner on the idiocy market.'

The phone rang.

'That must be Mr. Anderson,' I said, staggering to my feet. I grabbed Olivia's stone hand and dragged her with me to the kitchen. I wasn't about to let her out of my sight.

'Mr. Anderson?' I answered the phone.

'No, it's me,' Marcel said.

'Maggie!'

Olivia scrutinized my expression.

'Just making sure you were still alive,' Marcel said sourly. 'I'm fine. I told you that it wasn't-'

'Yeah. I got it. 'Bye.'

Marcel hung up on me.

I sighed and let my head hang back, staring at the ceiling. 'That's going to be a problem.'

Olivia squeezed my hand. 'They aren't excited I'm here.'

‘Not especially. But it's none of their business anyway.’

Olivia put her arm around me. ‘So, what do we do now?’ she mused. She seemed to talk to herself for a moment. ‘Things to do. Loose ends to tie.’

‘What things to do?’

Her face was suddenly careful. ‘I don't know for sure... I need to see Chiaz.’

Would she leave so soon? My stomach dropped.

‘Could you stay?’ I begged. ‘Please? For just a little while. I've missed you so much.’ My voice broke.

‘If you think that's an innovative idea.’ Her eyes were unhappy.

‘I do. You can stay here-Mr. Anderson would love that.’

‘I have a house, Bell.’

I nodded, disappointed but resigned. She hesitated, studying me.

‘Well, I need to go get a suitcase of clothes, at the very least.’

I threw my arms around her. ‘Olivia, you're the best!’

‘And I think I'll need to hunt. Immediately,’ she added in a strained voice.

‘Oops.’ I took a step back.

‘Can you stay out of trouble for one hour?’ she asked skeptically. Then, before I could answer, she held up one finger and closed her eyes. Her face went smooth and blank for a few seconds.

And then her eyes opened, and she answered her question. 'Yes, you'll be fine. For tonight, anyway.' She grimaced. Even making faces, she looked like an angel.

'You'll come back?' I asked in a small voice.

'I promise one hour.'

I glanced at the clock over the kitchen table. She laughed and leaned in quickly to kiss me on the cheek. Then she was gone.

Part: 11

Bottomless

I took a deep breath. Olivia would be back. I suddenly felt so much better.

I had plenty to do to keep myself busy while I waited. A shower was first on the agenda. I sniffed my shoulders as I undressed, but I couldn't smell anything but the brine and seaweed scent of the ocean. I wondered what Olivia had meant about me smelling bad.

When I had cleaned up, I went back to the kitchen. I couldn't see any signs that Mr. Anderson's child was eaten recently, and he would be hungry when he got back. I hummed tunelessly to myself as I moved around the kitchen.

While Thursday's casserole rotated in the microwave, I made up the couch with sheets and an old pillow. Olivia wouldn't need it, but Mr. Anderson would need to see it. I was careful not to watch the clock. There was no reason to start myself panicking; Olivia had promised.

I hurried through my dinner, not tasting it-just feeling the ache as it slid down my raw throat. Mostly I was thirsty; I

must have drunk a half-gallon of water by the time I was finished. All the salt in my system had dehydrated me.

I went to try to watch TV while I waited.

Olivia was already there, sitting on her improvised bed. Her eyes were liquid butterscotch. She smiled and patted the pillow. 'Thanks.'

'You're early,' I said, elated.

I sat down next to her and leaned my head on her shoulder. She put her cold arms around me and sighed.

'Bell. What are we going to do with you?'

'I don't know,' I admitted. 'I have been trying my hardest.'

'I believe you.' It was silent.

'Does-does he...' I took a deep breath. It was harder to say his name out loud, even though I was able to think about it now. 'Does Marcel know you're here?' I couldn't help asking. It was my pain. I'd deal with it when she was gone, I promised myself, and felt sick at the thought.

'No...'

There was only one way that could be true. 'He's not with Chiaz and Esme?'

'He checks in every few months.'

'Oh.' He must still be out enjoying his distractions. I focused my curiosity on a safer topic. 'You said you flew here... Where did you come from?'

'I was in Denali. Visiting Tanya's family.'

'Is he here? Did he come with you?'

She shook her head. 'He didn't approve of my interfering. We promised...' she trailed off, and then her tone changed. 'And you think Mr. Anderson won't mind my being here?' she asked, sounding worried.

'Mr. Anderson thinks you're wonderful, Olivia.'

'Well, we're about to find out.'

Sure enough, a few seconds later I heard the cruiser pull into the driveway. I jumped up and hurried to open the door.

Mr. Anderson trudged slowly up the walk, his eyes on the ground and his shoulders slumped. I walked forward to meet him; he didn't even see me until I hugged him around the waist. He embraced me back fiercely.

'I'm so sorry about Harry, Dad.'

'I'm going to miss him,' Mr. Anderson mumbled.

'How's Sue doing?'

'She seems dazed like she hasn't grasped it yet. Sam's staying with her...' The volume of his voice faded in and out. 'Those poor kids. Leah's just a year older than you, and Seth is only fourteen...' He shook his head.

He kept his arms tight around me as he started toward the door again.

'Um, Dad?' I figured I'd better warn him. 'You'll never guess who's here.'

He looked at me blankly. His head swiveled around, and he spied the Mercedes across the street, the porch light reflecting off the glossy black paint.

Before he could react, Olivia was in the doorway.

‘Hi, Mr. Anderson,’ she said in a subdued voice. ‘I’m sorry I came at such an inconvenient time.’

‘Olivia?’ Peered at the slight figure in front of him as if he doubted what his eyes were telling him. ‘Olivia is that you?’

‘It’s me,’ she confirmed. ‘I was in the neighborhood.’

‘Is Chiaz...?’

‘No, I’m alone.’

Both Olivia and I knew he wasn’t asking about Chiaz. His arm tightened around my shoulder.

‘She can stay here, can’t she?’ I pleaded. ‘I already asked her.’

‘Of course,’ Mr. Anderson said mechanically. ‘We’d love to have you, Olivia.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Anderson. I know it’s horrid timing.’

‘No, it’s fine. I’m going to be busy doing what I can for Harry’s family; it will be nice for Karly to have some company.’

‘There’s dinner for you on the table, Dad,’ I told him.

‘Thanks, Bell.’ He gave me one more squeeze before he shuffled toward the kitchen.

Olivia went back to the couch, and I followed her. This time, she was the one to pull me against her shoulder.

‘You look tired.’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed and shrugged. ‘Near-death experiences do that to me...

So, what does Chiaz think of you being here?’

'He doesn't know. He and Esme were on a hunting trip. I'll hear from him in a few days when he gets back.'

'You won't tell him, though... when he checks in again?' I asked. She knew I didn't mean Chiaz now.

'No. He'd bite my head off,' Olivia said grimly.

I laughed once and then sighed.

I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to stay up all night talking to Olivia. And it didn't make sense for me to be tired, what with crashing on Marcel's couch all day. But drowning had taken a lot out of me, and my eyes wouldn't stay open. I rested my head on her stone shoulder and drifted into more peaceful oblivion than I had any hope of.

I woke early, from a deep and dreamless sleep, feeling well-rested, but stiff. I was on the couch tucked under the blankets I'd laid out for Olivia, and I could hear her and Mr. Anderson talking in the kitchen. It sounded like Mr. Anderson was fixing her breakfast.

'How bad was it, Mr. Anderson?' Olivia asked softly, and at first, I thought they were talking about the Clearwater's.

Mr. Anderson sighed.

'Bad.'

'Tell me about it. I want to know exactly what happened when we left.' There was a pause while a cupboard door was closed and a dial on the stove was clicked off. I waited, cringing.

'I've never felt so helpless,' Mr. Anderson began gradually. 'I didn't know what to do. That first week- I thought I was going to have to hospitalize her. She wouldn't eat or drink, she wouldn't move. Dr. LORENZO was throwing around words

like 'catatonic,' but I didn't let him up to see her. I was afraid it would terrify her.' 'She locked out of it though?'

'I had Ayanna suit to take her to the islands. I just didn't want to be the one... if she had to go to a clinic or something.

I expected to be with her mother to attend. When we started gathering her dresses, she woke up energetically. I've never more beheld Karly throw a tantrum like that before she was insane. She was never one for the tantrums, but, boy, did she fly into violence.

She threw her dresses wherever and squealed that we couldn't make her leave-and then she finally started sobbing. I imagined that would be the transforming position. I didn't argue when she insisted on staying here... and she did seem to get better at first...'

Mr. Anderson pursued off. It was hard accepting this, knowing how much pain I'd caused him.

'However?' Olivia assisted.

'She went back to school and work, she ate, masturbated, and napped in the nude and did her homework.

She acknowledged when someone questioned her a direct question. Although she was... questionnaire. Her eyes were empty of feelings colorless. There were lots of little things-she wouldn't listen to music anymore; I found a bunch of records crushed in the debris.

She didn't read; she wouldn't be in the corresponding room meanwhile the TV was proceeding with paid programming, not that she watched it so much already. I finally concluded it out-she was withdrawing everything that might prompt her of him.



“We could hardly talk; I was so worried about saying something that would upset her-the littlest things would make her flinch-and she never volunteered anything. She would just answer if I asked her something.

‘She was alone all the time. She didn't call her friends back, and after a while, they stopped requesting.

‘It was a night of the living decedent round hereabouts. I still hear her screaming in her slumber...’

I could almost see him shuddering. I shuddered, too, remembering. And then I sighed. I hadn't fooled him at all, not for one second.

‘I'm so melancholy, Mr. Anderson,’ Olivia said, speech glum.

‘It's not your fault.’ The way he said it made it clear that he was holding someone responsible. ‘You were always a good friend to her.’

‘She seems more valid now, though.’

‘Yeah, ever since she started hanging out with Marcel, back- I've regarded a real improvement. She has some color in her chops when she comes home, some light in her eyes.

She's hilarious.’ He hesitated, and his speech was modified when he articulated repeatedly. ‘He's a year or so more fashionable than her, and I know she used to think of him as a friend, but I think maybe it's something more now or headed that direction, anyhow.’

Mr. Anderson said this in an almost opposing nature. It was a lesson, not for Olivia, but for her to pass along. ‘Maggie's old for his ages,’ he proceeded, still blowing defensive. ‘He's taken care of his father the way Karly took care of her mother

emotionally. It culminated in him. He's a good-looking kid, too-takes after his mom's view. He's good for Bell, you know,' Mr. Anderson insisted.

Before play-

It's all flying by...

Going back and forth in my life...

(Her in the past)

Marcel- What she does to me for me that goes through me- I want her to draw arbitrary things on me with a Sharpie marker in whatever color she feels is right or fits her fancy.

Like a little heart in my mid-palm that is arched like only she can do with tapered arches. I say I love you every time I stare at it when not with her in some random class or something like that, it's kind of dainty, adorable, and beautiful; in a moderately cute primary way, I prefer seeing her girlie-ness on me, overly sweet overall.

(Don't you see, this hand opens to reveal the humble yet brave portrayal?)

I love her for this... adorable things like this one are what make her all mine! AWE! I would tattoo it if she wanted me to.

Oppositely just have it drawn again if washed continuously. Just like her crying that I whip away, she hates yet I am okay with it and find it sweet. She mine! <3

Karly- The devil is the root of all evil, don't criticize any moron like you or mom for instance for what he is arranging, even I want to say I get that one too, that fool is continuously up my ass; go to hell and stay there. Smell your rump for a while.

Marcel- 'I am virtually frightened to touch her for the fear -that- I might break her.'

(Intumesce significance in the origins.)

Kissing- Noses don't regularly really hit, they interlock collectively side by side touching and touching, and rubbing on the tip afterward -perfectly- when we kiss. Dreamily she is made for me only.

~\*~

(Recollection)

Marcel sucked in a breath. 'He got that close?'

'He got precise, right up on me.'

Me- And- I felt her cover and molding-ness of her girlie body.

I stroked my hair with your fingers and feel my boobs and in-between my boobs and rub my body soft loft non-stop in a holding hug and unbraced- feel my vagina backing forth intake hold of yet in a- teasing, playful, jokey, mischievous, bantering, and joshing why.

Press held tight, feel, kiss, feel, kiss, stop to breath, feel, and then kiss -panting- in-love kissing. Arms laced, braced, pulled in tighter, which moved each movement into our bodies.

'Loving in braces, looking at her lovely face... time held still so we could feel, freewheel. You and I- they cannot deny- love is real when you can see it and feel it, they try to steal us apart, breaking a heart.

They're not smart, missing the dart- that smashes us isolated... crossed the heart, broken glass- breaking and quivering us up fast...

Did I ask- like, well it lasts? Going so quick, time that has passed slowly, yes ever so fast- falling to you down like thundershower and pain with an endeavor, comparable to a speeding train, spring- gone, winter love materialized in the haze, love stayed, we misbehaved- in love, notwithstanding them being the cold inside to hide. Accesses denied.'

Part: 12

Allure

'Then it's good she has him,' Olivia agreed.

Mr. Anderson singled out a big gust of air, folding quickly to the lack of opposition.

'Okay, so I guess that's overstating things. I don't know... even with Marcel, now and then I see something in her eyes, and I wonder if I've ever grasped how much pain she's really in It's not normal Olivia, and it... it frightens me. Not normal at all. Not like someone... left her, but as someone died.' His voice cracked.

It was like someone had died-like I had died. Because it had to be more than just losing the truest of true love as if that were not enough to kill anyone. It was also losing a whole future, a whole family- the whole life that I'd chosen...

Mr. Anderson went on in a hopeless tone. 'I don't know if she's going to get over it-I'm not sure if it's in her nature to heal from something like this. She's always been such a constant little thing. She doesn't get past things, change her mind.'

'She's one of a kind,' Olivia agreed in a dry voice.

‘And Olivia...’ Mr. Anderson hesitated. ‘Now, you know how fond I am of you, and I can tell that she’s happy to see you, but... I’m a little worried about what your visit will do to her.’

‘So am I, Mr. Anderson, so am I. I wouldn’t have come if I’d had any idea. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t apologize, honey. Who knows? It will be good for her.’

‘I hope you’re right.’

There was a long break while Pittsburgh scraped plates and Mr. Anderson chewed.

I wondered where Olivia was hiding the food.

‘Olivia, I have to ask you something,’ Mr. Anderson said awkwardly.

Olivia was calm. ‘Go ahead.’

‘He’s not coming back to visit, too, is he?’ I could hear the suppressed anger in Mr. Anderson’s voice.

Olivia answered in a soft, reassuring tone. ‘He doesn’t even know I’m here.’

The last time I spoke with him, he was in South America.’

I stiffened as I heard this added information and listened harder.

‘That’s something, at least.’ Mr. Anderson snorted. ‘Well, I hope he’s enjoying himself.’

For the first time, Olivia’s voice had a bit of steel in it. ‘I wouldn’t make assumptions, Mr. Anderson.’ I knew how her eyes would flash when she used that tone.

A chair scooted from the table, scraping loudly across the floor. I pictured Mr. Anderson getting up; there was no way Olivia would make that kind of noise. The faucet ran, splashing against a dish.

It didn't sound like they were going to say anything more about Marcel, so I decided it was time to wake up.

I turned over, bouncing against the springs to make them squeak. Then I yawned loudly.

All was quiet in the kitchen.

I stretched and groaned.

'Olivia?' I asked innocently; the soreness rasping in my throat added nicely to the charade.

'I'm in the kitchen, Bell,' Olivia called, no hint in her voice that she suspected my eavesdropping. But she was good at hiding things like that.

Mr. Anderson had to leave then-he was helping Sue Clearwater with the funeral arrangements. It would have been an exceptionally long day without Olivia. She never spoke about leaving, and I didn't ask her. I knew it was inevitable, but I put it out of my mind.

Instead, we talked about her family-all but one.

Chiaz was working nights in Ithaca and teaching part-time at Cornell. Esme was restoring a seventeenth-century house, a historical monument, in the forest north of the city.

Emmah and Rose had gone to Europe for a few months on another honeymoon, but they were back now.

Joh was at Cornell, too, studying philosophy this time. And Olivia had been doing some personal research, concerning

the information I'd accidentally uncovered for her last spring. She'd successfully tracked down the asylum where she'd spent the last years of her human life. The life she had no memory of.

'My name was Mary Olivia Brandon,' she told me quietly. 'I had a little sister named Cynthia. Her daughter-my niece-is still alive in Biloxi.'

'Did you find out why they put you in... that place?' What would drive parents to that extreme? Even if their daughter saw visions of the future...

She just shook her head, her topaz eyes thoughtful. 'I couldn't find much about them. I went through all the old newspapers on microfiche. My family wasn't mentioned often; they weren't part of the social circle that made the papers. My parents' engagement was there, and Cynthia's.' The name felt uncertainty from her tongue. 'My birth was announced... and my death. I found my grave. I also filched my admissions sheet from the old asylum archives. The date of the admission and the date of my tombstone is the same.'

I didn't know what to say, and, after a short pause, Olivia moved on to lighter topics.

The Barns were reassembled now, with the one exception, spending Cornell's spring break in Denali with Tanya and her family. I listened too eagerly to even the most trivial news. She never mentioned the one I was most interested in, and for that I was grateful. It was enough to listen to the stories of the family I'd once dreamed of belonging to.

Mr. Anderson didn't get back until after dark, and he looked more worn than he had the night before. He would be headed back to the reservation first thing in the morning for Harry's funeral, so he turned in early. I stayed on the couch with Olivia again.

Mr. Anderson was a stranger when he came down the stairs before the sun was up, wearing an old suit I'd never seen him in before. Mr. Anderson hung open; I guessed it was too tight to fasten the buttons. His tie was a bit wide for the current style. He tiptoed to the door, trying not to wake us up. I let him go, pretending to sleep, as Olivia did on the recliner.

As soon as he was out the door, Olivia sat up. Under the quilt, she was fully dressed.

'So, what are we doing today?' She asked.

'I don't know, do you see anything interesting happening?'

She smiled and shook her head. 'But it's still early.'

All the time I'd been spending in La Push meant a pile of things I'd been neglecting at home, and I decided to catch up on my chores. I wanted to do something, anything that might make life easier for Mr. Anderson-it would make him feel just a little better to come home to a clean, organized house. I started with the bathroom-it showed the most signs of neglect.

While I worked, Olivia leaned against the doorjamb and asked nonchalant questions about my, well, our high school friends and what they've been up to since she'd left. Her face stayed casual and emotionless, but I sensed her disapproval when she realized how little I could tell her. Or I just had a guilty conscience after eavesdropping on her conversation with Mr. Anderson yesterday morning.

I was up to my elbows in Comet, scrubbing the floor of the bathtub, when the doorbell rang.

I looked at Olivia at once, and her expression was perplexed, almost worried, which was strange; Olivia was never taken by surprise.



'Hold on!' I shouted in the general direction of the front door, getting up and hurrying to the sink to rinse my arms off.

'Bell,' Olivia said with a trace of frustration in her voice, 'I have a fairly good guess who that might be, and I think I'd better step out.'

'Guess?' I echoed. Since when did Olivia have to guess anything?

'If this is a repeat of my egregious lapse in foresight yesterday, then it's most likely Marcel Black or one of his... friends.'

I stared at her, putting it together. 'You can't see werewolves?'

She grimaced. 'So, it would seem.' She was annoyed by this fact.

The doorbell rang again-buzzing twice quickly and impatiently.

'You don't have to go anywhere, Olivia. You were here first.'

She laughed her silvery little laugh-it had a dark edge. 'Trust me-it wouldn't be an innovative idea to have me and Marcel Black in a room together.'

She kissed my cheek swiftly before she vanished through Mr. Anderson's door and out his back window, no doubt.

The doorbell rang again.

THE FUNERAL-

I SPUNTED DOWN THE STAIRS AND THREW THE DOOR open.

It was Marcel, of course. Even blind, Olivia wasn't slow.

He was standing about six feet back from the door, his nose wrinkled in distaste, but his face otherwise smooth-masklike. He didn't fool me; I could see the faint trembling of his hands.

Hostility rolled off him in waves. It brought back that awful afternoon when he'd chosen Sam over me, and I felt my chin jerk up defensively in response.

Marcel's Rabbit idled by the curb with Jared behind the wheel and Embry in the passenger seat. I understood what this meant: they were afraid to let him come here alone. It made me sad, and a little annoyed. The Barn's weren't like that.

'Hey,' I finally said when he didn't speak.

Maggie pursed his lips, still hanging back from the door. His eyes flickered across the front of the house.

I ground my teeth. 'She's not here. Do you need anything?' He hesitated. 'You're alone?' 'Yes.' I sighed.

'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

'Of course, you can, Marcel. Come on in.'

Marcel glanced over his shoulder at his friends in the car. I saw Embry shake his head just a tiny bit. For some reason, this bugged me to no end.

My teeth clenched together again. 'Chicken' I mumbled under my breath.

Maggie's eyes flashed back to me, his thick, black brows pushing into a furious angle over his deep-set eyes. His jaw set, and he marched-there was no other way to describe the way he moved up the sidewalk and shrugged past me into the house.

I locked eyes with first Jared and then Embry-I didn't like the hard way they eyed me; did they think I would let anything hurt Marcel? ...Before I shut the door on them.

Marcel was in the hall behind me, staring at the mess of blankets in the living room.

'Slumber party?' he asked, his tone sarcastic.

'Yeah,' I answered with the same level of acid. I didn't like Marcel when he acted this way. 'What's it to you?'

He wrinkled his nose again like he smelled something unpleasant. 'Where's your 'friend'?' I could hear the quotation marks in his tone.

'She had some errands to run. Look, Marcel, what do you want?'

Something about the room seemed to make him edgier-his long arms were quivering. He didn't answer my question. Instead, he moved on to the kitchen, his restless eyes darting everywhere.

I followed him. He paced back and forth along the short counter.

'Hey,' I said, putting myself in his way. He stopped pacing and stared down at me. 'What's your problem?'

'I don't like having to be here.'

That stung. I winced, and his eyes tightened.

'Then I'm sorry you had to come,' I muttered. 'Why don't you tell me what you need so you can leave?'

'I just must ask you a couple of questions. It shouldn't take long. We must get back for the funeral.'

‘Okay. Get it over with then.’ I was overdoing it with the antagonism, but I didn’t want him to see how much this hurt. I knew I wasn’t being fair. I’d picked the bloodsucker over him last night. I’d hurt him first.

He took a deep breath, and his trembling fingers were suddenly still. His face smoothed into a serene mask.

‘One of the Barn’s is staying here with you,’ he stated.

‘Yes, Olivia Natalie.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘How long is she here for?’

‘As long as she wants to be.’ The belligerence was still there in my tone.

‘It’s an open invitation.’

‘Do you think you could... please... explain to her about the other one- Maggie?’

I paled. ‘I told her about that.’

He nodded. ‘You should know that we can only watch our lands with Natalie here. You’ll only be safe in La Push. I can’t protect you here anymore.’

‘Okay,’ I said in a small voice.

He looked away then, out the back windows. He didn’t continue.

‘Is that all?’

He kept his eyes on the glass as he answered. ‘Just one more thing.’

I waited, but he didn’t continue. ‘Yes...?’ I finally prompted.

‘Are the rest of them coming back now?’ he asked in a cool, quiet voice. It reminded me of Sam’s always calm manner. Marcel was becoming more like Sam... I wondered why that bothered me so much.

Now I don’t speak. He looked back at my face with probing eyes.

‘Well?’ He asked. He struggled to conceal the tension behind his serene expression.

‘No!’ I said finally. Grudgingly. ‘They aren’t coming back.’

His expression didn’t change. ‘Okay... that’s all.’

I glared at him; annoyance rekindled. ‘Well, run along now. Go tell Sam that the scary monsters aren’t coming to get you.’

‘Okay,’ he repeated, still calm.

That was it. Marcel walked swiftly from the kitchen. I waited to hear the front door open, but I heard nothing. I could hear the clock over the stove ticking, and I marveled again at how quiet he’d become.

Part: 13

Calamity

What a disaster... How could I have alienated him so completely in such a short amount of time? Would he forgive me when Olivia was gone? What if he didn’t?

I slumped against the counter and buried my face in my hands. How had I made such a mess of everything? But what could I have done differently? Even in hindsight, I couldn’t think of any better way and perfect course of action.

'Bell...?' Marcel asked in a troubled voice.

I pulled my face out of my hands to see Marcel hesitating in the kitchen doorway; he hadn't left when I'd thought. It was only when I saw the clear drops sparkling in my hands that I realized I was crying.

Marcel's calm expression was gone; his face was anxious and unsure. He walked quickly back to stand in front of me, ducking his head so that his eyes were closer to being on the same level as mine.

'Did it again, didn't I?'

'Did what?' I asked, my voice cracking.

'Broke my promise. Sorry.'

'O-okay,' I mumbled. 'I started it this time.'

His face is twisted. 'I knew how you felt about them. It shouldn't have taken me by surprise like that.'

I could see the revulsion in his eyes. I wanted to explain to him what Olivia was really like, to defend her against the judgments he'd made, but something warned me that now was not the time.

So-o, I just said, 'Sorry,' again.

'Let's not worry about it, okay? She's just visiting, right? She'll leave, and things will go back to normal.' 'Can't I be friends with you both at the same time?' I asked, my voice not hiding an ounce of the hurt I felt.

He shook his head slowly. 'No, I don't think you can.'

I sniffed and stared at his big feet. 'But you'll wait, right? You'll still be my friend, even though I love Olivia, too?'

I didn't look up, afraid to see what he'd think of that last part. It took him a minute to answer, so I was right not to look.

'Yeah, I'll always be your friend,' he said- gruffly. 'No matter what you love.'

'Promise?'

'Promise?'

I felt his arms wind around me, and I leaned against his chest, still sniffing.

'This- sucks...'

'Yeah.' Then he sniffed my hair and said, 'Ewe-ah.'

'What?' I demanded. I looked up to see that his nose was wrinkled again.

'Why does everyone keep doing that to me? I don't smell it!'

He smiled a little. 'Yes, you smell like them. Blech. Too sweet sickly sweet. And... icy. It burns my nose.'

'Really...?' That was strange.

Olivia smelled unbelievably wonderful. To a human, anyway. 'But why would Olivia think I smelled, too, then?'

That wiped his smile away. 'Huh. I don't smell so good to her, either.'

'Huh!'

'Well, you both smell fine to me.' I rested my head against him again. I was going to miss him terribly when he walked out of my door. It was a nasty Catch-22-on the one hand, I wanted Olivia to stay forever. I was going to die metaphorically when she left me. But how was I supposed to go

without seeing Maggie for any length of time? What a mess, I thought again.

‘I’ll miss you,’ Marcel whispered, echoing my thoughts. ‘Every minute. I hope she leaves soon.’

‘It doesn’t have to be that way, Maggie.’

He sighed. ‘Yes, it does. Bell. You... love her. So-o, I’d better not get anywhere near her. I’m not sure that I’m even-tempered enough to handle that. Sam would be mad if I broke the treaty, and,’-his voice turned sarcastic-‘you probably wouldn’t like it too much if I killed your friend.’

I recoiled from him when he said that, but he only tightened his arms, refusing to let me escape. ‘There’s no point in avoiding the truth. That’s the way things are, Bells.’

‘I do not like the way things are.’

Marcel freed one arm so that he could cup his big brown hand under my chin and make me look at him. ‘Yeah. It was easier when we were both human, wasn’t it?’

I sighed...!

We stared at each other for a long moment. His hand smoldered against my skin. In my face, I knew there was nothing but wistful sadness- I didn’t want to have to say goodbye now, no matter how short a time. At first, his face reflected mine, but then, as neither of us looked away, his expression changed.

He released me, lifting his other hand to brush his fingertips along my cheek, trailing them down to my jaw. I could feel his fingers tremble-not with anger this time. He pressed his palm against my cheek so that my face was trapped between his burning hands.



'Bell,' he whispered.

I was frozen...

No! I hadn't made this decision yet. I didn't know if I could do this, and now I was out of time to think. But I would have been a fool if I thought rejecting him now would have no consequences.

I stared back at him. He was not my Marcel, but he could be. His face was familiar and beloved. In so many real ways, I did love him. He was my comfort, my safe harbor. Right now, I could choose to have him belong to me.

Olivia was back for the moment, but that changed nothing. True love was forever lost. The prince was never coming back to kiss me awake from my enchanted sleep. I was not a princess. So, what was the fairy-tale protocol for other kisses? The mundane kind that didn't break any spells.

It would be easy-like holding his hand or having his arms around me. It would feel nice. It wouldn't feel like a betrayal. Besides, who was I betraying, anyway? Just myself.

Keeping his eyes on mine, Marcel began to bend his face toward me. And I was still undecided.

The shrill ring of the phone made us both jump- but it did not break his focus. He took his hand from under my chin and reached over me to grab the receiver, but still held my face securely with the hand against my cheek. His dark eyes did not free mine. I was too muddled to react, even to take advantage of the distraction.

Part: 14

Grimacing

‘Yes. You're right, dog.’ Olivia was snarling, too. ‘The Ministry is the very essence of our kind-they're the reason your hair stands on end when you smell me. They are the substance of your nightmares, the dread behind your instincts. I'm aware of that.’

‘And you take her to them like a bottle of wine for a party!’ he shouted.

‘You think she'd be better off if I left her here alone, with Maggie stalking her?’

‘We can handle the redhead.’

‘Then why is she still hunting?’

Marcel growled, and a shudder rippled through his torso.

‘Stop that!’ I shouted at them both, wild with impatience, ‘argue when we get back, let's go!’

Olivia turned for the car, disappearing in her haste; I hurried after her, pausing automatically to turn and lock the door.

Marcel caught my arm with a shivering hand. ‘Please, Bell; I'm begging.’

His dark eyes were glistening with tears. A lump filled my throat.

‘Maggie, I have to-’

‘You don't, though. You don't. You could stay here with me. You could stay alive... for Mr. Anderson... for me.’

The engine of Chiaz's Mercedes purred; the rhythm of the thrumming spiked when Olivia revved it impatiently. I shook

my head, tears spattering from my eyes with the sharp motion. I pulled my arm free, and he didn't fight me.

'Don't die, Bell,' he choked out. 'Don't go... Don't.'

What if I never saw him again?

The thought pushed me past the silent tears; a cry, moan, snuffle, and cry, broke out from my chest.

I flung my arms around his waist and hugged him for one too-short moment, burying my tear-wet face against his chest. He put his big hand on the back of my hair as if to hold me there.

'Bye, Maggie.' I pulled his hand from my hair and kissed his palm. I couldn't bear to look at his face. 'Sorry,' I whispered.

Then I spun and raced for the car. The door on the passenger side was open and waiting. I threw my backpack over the headrest and slid in, slamming the door behind me. 'Take care of Mr. Anderson!' I turned to shout out the window, but Marcel was nowhere in sight.

As Olivia stomped on the gas and with the tires screeching like human screams-spun us around to face the road, I caught sight of a shred of white near the edge of the trees. A piece of shoe. HATE- WE MADE OUR FLIGHT WITH SECONDS TO SPARE, AND THEN the true torture began.

The plane sat idle on the tarmac while the flight attendants strolled-so casually- up and down the aisle, patting the bags in the overhead compartments to make sure everything fit. The pilots leaned out of the cockpit, chatting with them as they passed.

Olivia's hand was hard on my shoulder, holding me in my seat while I bounced anxiously up and down.

'It's faster than running,' she reminded me in a muffled voice.

I just nodded in time with my bouncing.

At last, the plane rolled lazily from the gate, building speed with a gradual steadiness that tortured me further. I expected relief when we achieved liftoff, but my frenzied impatience didn't lessen. Olivia lifted the phone on the back of the seat in front of her before we'd stopped climbing, turning her back on the flight attendant who eyed her with disapproval. Something about my expression stopped the flight attendant from coming over to protest.

I tried to tune out what Olivia was murmuring to Joh; I didn't want to hear the words again, but some slipped through.

'I can't be sure, I keep seeing him do different things, he keeps changing his mind... A killing spree through the city, attacking the guard, lifting a car over his head in the main square... mostly things that would expose them-he knows that's the fastest way to force a reaction...'

'No, you can't.' Olivia's voice dropped until it was inaudible, though I was sitting inches from her. Contrarily, I listened harder. 'Tell Emmah no... Well, go after Emmah and Rose and bring them back... Think about it, Joh. If he sees any of us, what do you think he will do?'

She nodded. 'Exactly. I think Karly is the only chance-if there is a chance...

I'll do everything that can be done but prepare Chiaz; the odds aren't good.' She laughed then, and there was a catch in her voice. 'I've thought of that... Yes, I promise.' Her voice became pleading. 'Don't follow me. I promise, Joh.

One way or another, I'll get out... And I love you.'

She hung up and leaned back in her seat with her eyes closed. 'I hate lying to him.'

'Tell me everything, Olivia,' I begged. 'I don't understand. Why did you tell Joh to stop Emmah, why can't they come to help us?'

'Two reasons,' she whispered, her eyes still closed. 'The first I told him. We could try to stop Marcel ourselves-if Emmah could get her hands on him; we might be able to stop him long enough to convince him you're alive. But we can't sneak up on Marcel. And if he sees us coming for him, he'll just act that much faster. He'll throw a Brick through a wall or something, and the Ministry will take him down.'

'That's the second reason, of course, the reason I couldn't say to Joh. Because if they're there and the Ministry kills Marcel, they'll fight them. Bell.' She opened her eyes and stared at me, imploring.

'If there were any chance, we could win... if there were a way that the four of us could save my brother by fighting for him, it would be different. But we can't, and, Bell, I can't lose Joh like that.'

I realized why her eyes begged for my understanding. She was protecting Joh, at our expense, and at Marcel's, too. I understood, and I did not think badly of her.

I nodded...

'Couldn't Marcel hear you, though?' I asked. 'Wouldn't he know, as soon as he heard your thoughts, that I was alive, that there was no point to this?'

Not that there was any justification, either way. I still could not believe that he could react like this.

It made no sense! I remembered with painful clarity his words that day on the sofa, while we observed Romeo and Juliet kill themselves, one after the other.

I wasn't going to live without you, he'd said as if it should be such an obvious conclusion. But the words he had spoken in the forest as he'd left me had canceled all that out-forcefully.

'If he were listening,' she explained. 'But unbelievably, it's possible to lie with your thoughts. If you had died, I would still try to stop him. And I would be thinking 'she's alive, she's alive' as hard as I could. He knows that.'

I ground my teeth in mute frustration.

'If there were any way to do this without you, Bell, I wouldn't be jeopardizing you like this. It's very wrong of me.'

'Don't be stupid. I'm the last thing you should be worrying about.' I shook my head impatiently. 'Tell me what you meant, about hating to lie to Joh.'

She smiled a grim smile. 'I promised him I would get out before they killed me, too. It's not something I can guarantee-not by a long shot.' She raised her eyebrows as if willing me to take the danger more seriously.

'Who is this Ministry?' I demanded in a whisper. 'What makes them so much more dangerous than Emmah, Joh, Rose, and you?' It was hard to imagine something scarier than that. She took a deep breath, and then abruptly leveled a dark glance over my shoulder. I turned in time to see the man in the aisle seat looking away as if he wasn't listening to us.

He was a businessperson, in a dark suit with a power tie and a laptop on his knees. While I stared at him with irritation,

he opened the computer and very conspicuously put headphones on.

I leaned closer to Olivia. Her lips were at my ears as she breathed the story.

'I was surprised that you recognized the name,' she said. 'That you understood so immediately what it meant when I said he was going to Italy. I thought I would have to explain. How much did Marcel tell you?'

'He just said they were an old, powerful family-like royalty. That you didn't provoke them unless you wanted to... die,' I whispered. The last word was hard to choke out.

'You have to understand,' she said, her voice slower, more measured now.

'We Barns are unique in more ways than you know. It's... abnormal for so many of us to live together in peace. It's the same for Tanya's family in the north, and Chiaz speculates that abstaining makes it easier for us to be civilized, to form bonds based on love rather than survival or convenience. Even James's little coven of three was unusually large-and you saw how easily Sophiet left them. Our kind travel alone, or in pairs, as a rule. Chiaz's family is the biggest in existence with one exception. The Ministry.

'There were three of them originally, Aron, Caius, and Marcellus.'

'I've seen them,' I mumbled. 'In the picture in Chiaz's study.'

Olivia nodded. 'Two females joined them over time, and the five of them make up the family. I'm not sure, but I suspect that their age is what gives them the ability to live peacefully together. They are well over three thousand years old. Or it's

their gifts that give them extra tolerance. Like Marcel and I, Aron and Marcellus are... talented.'

She continued before I could ask. 'Or it's just their love of power that binds them together. Royalty is an apt description.'

'But if there are only five-'

'Five that make up the family,' she corrected. 'That doesn't include their guard.'

I took a deep breath. 'That sounds... serious.'

'Oh, it is,' she assured me. 'There were nine members of the guard that were permanent, the last time we heard. Others are more... transitory. It changes. And many of them are gifted as well-with formidable gifts, gifts that make what I can do look like a parlor trick. The Ministry chose them for their abilities, physical or otherwise.'

I opened my mouth and then closed it. I didn't think I wanted to know how bad the odds were.

She nodded again as if she understood exactly what I was thinking. 'They don't get into too many confrontations. No one is stupid enough to mess with them. They stay in their city, leaving only as duty calls.'

'Duty?' I wondered.

'Didn't Marcel tell you what they do?'

'No,' I said, feeling the blank expression on my face.

Olivia looked over my head again, toward the businessperson, and put her wintry lips back to my ear.

'There's a reason he called them royalty... the ruling class. Over the millennia, they have assumed the position of



enforcing our rules-which translates to punishing transgressors. They fulfill that duty decisively.'

My eyes popped wide with shock. 'There are rules?' I asked in a voice that was too loud.

Motivations...

'Got it!' he crowed. 'Another promise to keep.'

'What are you talking about?'

He let go of my hand and pointed toward the southern edge of the beach, where the flat, rocky half-moon dead-ended against the sheer sea cliffs. I stared, uncomprehending.

'Didn't I promise to take you cliff diving?'

I shivered... strongly.

'Yeah, it'll be cold-not as cold as it is today. Can you feel the weather changing? The pressure? It will be warmer tomorrow. You up for it?'

The dark water did not look inviting, and, from this angle, the cliffs looked even higher than before.

Nonetheless, it had been days since I'd heard Marcel's voice. That was part of the problem. I was addicted to the sound of my delusions. It made things worse if I went too long without them. Jumping off a cliff was certain to remedy that situation.

'Sure, I'm up for it. Fun.'

'It's a date,' he said and draped his arm around my shoulders.

'Okay-now let's go get you some sleep.' I didn't like the way the circles under his eyes were beginning to look permanently etched into his skin.

I woke early the next morning and snuck a change of clothes out to the truck. I had a feeling that Mr. Anderson would approve of today's plan about as much as he would approve of the motorcycle.

The idea of a distraction from all my worries had me almost excited. It would be fun. A date with Marcel, a date with Marcel... I laughed darkly to myself. Maggie could say what he wanted about us being a messed-up pair- I was the one who was truly messed up. I made the werewolf seem downright normal.

I expected Marcel to meet me out front, the way he usually did when my noisy truck announced my arrival. When he didn't, I guessed that he might still be sleeping. I would wait- let him to get as much rest as he could. He needed his sleep, and that would give the daytime to warm a bit more.

Maggie had been right about the weather, though; it had changed in the night. A thick layer of clouds pressed heavily on the atmosphere now, making it almost sultry; it was warm and close under the gray blanket. I left my sweater in the truck.

I knocked quietly on the door.

'C'mon in, Bell,' Billy said.

He was at the kitchen table, eating cold cereal.

'Maggie sleeping?'

'Err, no.' He set his spoon down, and his eyebrows pulled together.

'What happened?' I demanded. I could tell from his expression that something had happened.

'Embry, Jared, and Paul crossed a fresh trail early this morning. Sam and Maggie took off to help. Sam was hopeful-

she'd hedged herself in beside the mountains. He thinks they have a good chance to finish this.' 'Oh, no, Billy,' I whispered. 'Oh, no.'

He chuckled, deep and low. 'Do you like La Push so well that you want to extend your sentence here?'

'Don't make jokes, Billy. This is too scary for that.'

'You're right,' he agreed, still complacent. His ancient eyes were impossible to read. 'This one's tricky.' I bit my lip.

'It's not as dangerous for them as you think it is. Sam knows what he's doing. You're the one that you should worry about. The angel doesn't want to fight them. She's just trying to find a way around them... to you.'

'How does Sam know what he's doing?' I demanded, brushing aside his concern for me. 'They've only killed just the one angel that could have been lucky.'

'We take what we do very seriously, Bell. Nothing's been forgotten. Everything they need to know has been passed down from father to son for generations.'

That didn't comfort me the way he intended it to. The memory of Maggie, wild, catlike, lethal, was too strong in my head. If she couldn't get around the wolves, she would eventually try to go through them.

Billy went back to his breakfast; I sat down on the sofa and flipped aimlessly through the TV channels. That didn't last long. I started to feel closed in by the small room, claustrophobic, upset by the fact that I couldn't see out the curtained windows.

'I'll be at the beach,' I told Billy abruptly and hurried out the door.

Being outside didn't help as much as I'd hoped. The clouds pushed down with an invisible weight that kept the claustrophobia from easing. The forest seemed strangely vacant as I walked toward the beach. I didn't see any animals-no birds, no squirrels. I couldn't hear any birds, either. The silence was eerie; there wasn't even the sound of wind in the trees.

I knew it was all just a product of the weather, but it still made me edgy. The heavy, warm pressure of the atmosphere was perceptible even to my weak human senses, and it hinted at something major in the storm department. A glance at the sky backed this up, the clouds were churning sluggishly despite the lack of breeze on the ground. The closest clouds were a smoky gray, but between the cracks, I could see another layer that was a gruesome purple color. The skies had a ferocious plan in store for today. The animals must be bunkering down.

As soon as I reached the beach, I wished I hadn't come-I'd already had enough of this place. I'd been here every day, wandering alone. Was it so much different from my nightmares? But where else to go? I trudged down to the driftwood tree and sat at the end so that I could lean against the tangled roots. I stared up at the angry sky broodingly, waiting for the first drops to break the stillness.

I tried not to think about the danger Marcel and his friends were in. Because nothing could happen to Marcel. The thought was unendurable. I'd lost too much already-would fate take the last few shreds of peace left behind? That seemed unfair, out of balance. But I'd violated some unknown rule, crossed some line that had condemned me. It was wrong to be so involved with myths and legends, to turn my back on the human world. Maybe...

No... Nothing would happen to Marcel. I had to believe that, or I wouldn't be able to function.

‘Argh!’ I groaned and jumped off the log. I couldn’t sit still; it was worse than pacing.

I’d been counting on hearing Marcel this morning. It seemed like that was the one thing that might make it bearable to live through this day.

The hole had been festering lately like it was getting revenge for the times that Marcel’s presence had tamed it. The edges burned.

The waves picked up as I paced, beginning to crash against the rocks, but there was still no wind. I felt pinned down by the pressure of the storm. Everything swirled around me, but it was perfectly still where I stood. The air had a faint electric charge- I could feel the static in my hair.

Farther out, the waves were angrier than they were along the shore. I could see them battering against the line of the cliffs, spraying big white clouds of seafoam into the sky. There was still no movement in the air, though the clouds roiled more quickly now. It was eerie looking like the clouds were moving by their own will. I shivered, though I knew it was just a trick of the pressure.

The cliffs were a black knife edge against the livid sky. Staring at them, I remembered the day Marcel had told me about Sam and his ‘gang.’ I thought of the boys-the werewolves-throwing themselves into the empty air.

The image of the falling, spiraling figures was still vivid in my mind. I imagined the utter freedom of the fall... I imagined the way Marcel’s voice would have sounded in my head furious, velvet, perfect... The burning in my chest flared agonizingly.

There had to be some way to quench it. The pain was growing increasingly intolerable by the second. I glared at the cliffs and the crashing waves.

Well, why not? Why not quench it right now?

Marcel had promised me cliff diving, hadn't he? Just because he was unavailable, should I have to give up the distraction I needed so desperately needed even worse because Marcel was out risking his life? Risking it for me.

If it weren't for me, Maggie would not be killing people here... just somewhere else, far away. If anything happened to Marcel, it would be my fault. That realization stabbed deep and had me jogging back up to the road toward Billy's house, where my truck waited.

I knew my way to the lane that passed closest to the cliffs, but I had to hunt for the little path that would take me out to the ledge. As I followed it, I looked for turns or Pittsburgh, knowing that Maggie had planned to take me off the lower outcropping rather than the top, but the path wound in a thin single line toward the brink with no options. I didn't have time to find another way down- the storm was moving in quickly now. The wind was finally beginning to touch me, the clouds pressing closer to the ground. Just as I reached the place where the dirt path fanned out into the stone precipice, the first drops broke through and splattered on my face.

It was not hard to convince myself that I didn't have time to search for another way- I wanted to jump from the top. This was the image that had lingered in my head. I wanted a long fall that would feel like flying.

I knew that this was the stupidest, most reckless thing I had done yet. The thought made me smile. The pain was

already easing as if my body knew that Marcel's voice was just seconds away...

The ocean sounded extremely far away, somehow farther than before, when I was on the path in the trees. I grimaced when I thought of the probable temperature of the water. But I wasn't going to let that stop me.

The wind blew stronger now, whipping the rain into eddies around me.

I stepped out to the edge, keeping my eyes on the space in front of me. My toes fell ahead blindly, caressing the edge of the rock when they encountered it. I drew in a deep breath and held it... waiting. 'Bell.'

I smiled and exhaled.

Yes? I didn't answer out loud, for fear that the sound of my voice would shatter the beautiful illusion. He sounded so real, so close. It was only when life was disapproving like this that I could hear the true memory of his voice-the velvet texture and the musical intonation that made up the most perfect of all voices.

'Don't do this,' he pleaded.

You wanted me to be human, I reminded him. Well, watch me.

'Please. For me.'

But you won't stay with me any other way.

'Please.' It was just a whisper in the blowing rain that tossed my hair and drenched my clothes-making me as wet as if this were my second jump of the day.

I rolled up onto the balls of my feet.

‘No, Bell!’ He was angry now, and the anger was so lovely.

I smiled and raised my arms straight out, as if I were going to dive, lifting my face into the rain. But it was too ingrained from years of swimming at the public pool-foot first, the first time. I leaned forward, crouching to get more spring...

And I flung myself off the cliff.

Part: 15

Midair

I screamed as I dropped through the open air like a meteor, but it was a scream of exhilaration and not fear. The wind resisted, trying vainly to fight the unconquerable gravity, pushing against me, and twirling me in spirals like a rocket crashing to the earth.

Yes! The word echoed through my head as I sliced through the surface of the water. It was icy, colder than I'd feared, and yet the chill only added to the height.

I was proud of myself as I plunged deeper into the freezing black water. I hadn't had one moment of terror-just pure adrenaline. The fall wasn't scary at all. Where was the challenge?

That was when the current caught me.

I'd been so preoccupied with the size of the cliffs, by the obvious danger of their high, sheer faces, that I hadn't worried at all about the dark water waiting. I never dreamed that the true menace was lurking far below me, under the heaving surf.

It felt like the waves were fighting over me, jerking me back and forth between them as if determined to share by pulling me into halves. I knew the right way to avoid riptide:



swim parallel to the beach rather than struggling for the shore. But the knowledge did me little good when I didn't know which way the shore was.

I couldn't even tell which way the surface was.

The angry water was black in every direction; there was no brightness to direct me upward. Gravity was all-powerful when it competed with the air, but it had nothing on the waves- I couldn't feel a downward pull, a sinking in any direction. Just the battering of the current that flung me round and round like a rag doll.

I fought to keep my breath in, to keep my lips locked around my last store of oxygen.

It didn't surprise me that my delusion of Marcel was there. He owed me that much, considering that I was dying. I was surprised by how sure that knowledge was. I was going to drown. I was drowning.

'Keep swimming!' Marcel begged urgently in my head.

Where?

There was nothing but darkness. There was no place to swim, I thought.

'Stop that!' He ordered. 'Don't you dare give up!'

The chilly water was numbing my arms and legs. I didn't feel the buffeting so much as before. It was more of just dizziness now, a helpless spinning in the water.

But I listened to him. I forced my arms to continue reaching, my legs to kick harder, though every second I was facing a new direction. It couldn't be doing any good. What was the point? 'Fight!' he yelled. 'Damn it, Bell, keep fighting.'

Why?

I didn't want to fight anymore. And it wasn't the light-headedness, or the cold, or the failure of my arms as the muscles gave out in exhaustion, that made me content to stay where I was. I was almost happy that it was over. This was an easier death than others I'd faced. Oddly peaceful.

I thought briefly of the clichés, about how you were supposed to see your life flash before your eyes. I was so much luckier. Who wanted to see a rerun, anyway?

I saw him, and I had no will fight. It was so clear, so much more defined than any memory.

My subconscious had stored Marcel away in flawless detail, saving him for this final moment. I could see his perfect face as if he were there, the exact shade of his icy skin, the shape of his lips, the line of his jaw, the gold glinting in his furious eyes. He was angry, naturally, that I was giving up. His teeth were clenched, and his nostrils flared with rage.

'No! Bell, no!'

My ears were flooded with the freezing water, but his voice was clearer than ever. I ignored his words and concentrated on the sound of his voice. Why would I fight when I was so happy where I was? Even as my lungs burned for more air and my legs cramped in the icy cold, I was content. I'd forgotten what real happiness felt like.

Happiness. It made the whole dying thing bearable.

The current one at that moment, shoving me abruptly against something hard, a rock invisible in the gloom. It hit me solidly across the chest, slamming into me like an iron bar, and the breath whooshed out of my lungs, escaping in a thick cloud of silver bubbles. Water flooded down my throat, choking and

burning. The iron bar was dragging me, pulling me away from Marcel, deeper into the dark, to the ocean floor.

Goodbye, I love you, was my last thought.

PARIS AT THAT MOMENT, MY HEAD BROKE THE SURFACE.

How disorienting. I'd been sure I was sinking. The current wouldn't let up. It was slamming me against more rocks; they beat against the center of my back sharply, rhythmically, pushing the water from my lungs. It gushed out in amazing volume, absolute torrents pouring from my mouth and nose. The salt burned, and my lungs burned, and my throat was too full of water to catch a breath and the rocks were hurting my back.

Somehow- I stayed in one place, though the waves still heaved around me. I couldn't see anything but water everywhere, reaching for my face.

'Breath!' A voice, wild with anxiety, ordered, and I felt a cruel stab of pain where I recognized the voice because it wasn't Marcel's.

I could not obey. The waterfall pouring from my mouth didn't stop long enough for me to catch a breath. The black, icy water filled my chest, burning.

The rock smacked into my back again, right between my shoulder blades, and another volley of water choked its way out of my lungs.

'Breathe, Bell! C'mon!' Marcel begged.

Black spots bloomed across my vision, getting wider and wider, blocking out the light.

The rock struck me again.

The rock wasn't cold like the water; it was hot on my skin. I realized it was Marcel's hand, trying to beat the water from my lungs. The iron bar that had dragged me from the sea was also... warm... My head whirled; the black spots covered everything...

Was I dying again, then? I didn't like it. This wasn't as good as the last time. It was only dark now, nothing worth looking at here. The sound of the crashing waves faded into the black and became a quiet, even whoosh that sounded like it was coming from the inside of my ears...

'Bell?' Marcel asked, his voice still tense, but not as wild as before. 'Bells, honey, can you hear me?'

The contents of my head swished and rolled sickeningly like they'd joined the rough water...

'How long has she been unconscious?' Someone else asked.

The voice that was not Marcel's shocked me, jarred me into a more focused awareness.

I realized that I was still. There was no tug of the current on me-the heaving was inside my head. The surface under me was flat and motionless. It felt grainy against my bare arms.

'I don't know,' Marcel reported, still frantic. His voice was awfully close. Hands-so warm they had to be his- I brushed wet hair from my cheeks. 'A few minutes? It didn't take long to tow her to the beach.' The quiet whooshing inside my ears was not the waves-it was the air moving in and out of my lungs again. Each breath burned-the passageways were as raw as if I'd scrubbed them out with steel wool. But I was breathing.

And I was freezing. A thousand sharp, icy beads were striking my face and arms, making the cold worse.

'She's breathing. She'll come around. We should get her out of the cold, though. I don't like the color she's turning...' I recognized Sam's voice this time.

'You think it's okay to move her?'

'She didn't hurt her back or anything when she fell?'

'I don't know.'

They hesitated.

I tried to open my eyes. It took me a minute, but then I could see the dark, purple clouds, flinging the freezing rain down at me. 'Maggie?' I croaked.

Marcel's face blocked out the sky. 'Oh!' he gasped, relief washing over his features. His eyes were wet from the rain. 'Oh, Bell! Are you okay? Can you hear me? Do you hurt anywhere?'

'J-Just m-my throat,' I stuttered, my lips quivering from the cold.

'Let's get you out of here, then,' Marcel said. He slid his arms under me and lifted me without effort-like picking up an empty box. His chest was bare and warm; he hunched his shoulders to keep the rain off me. My head lolled over his arm. I stared vacantly back toward the furious water, beating the sand behind him.

'You got her?' I heard Sam ask.

'Yeah, I'll take it from here. Get back to the hospital. I'll join you later.'

Thanks, Sam.'

My head was still rolling. None of his words sunk in at first. Sam didn't answer. There was no sound, and I wondered if he was already gone.

The water licked and writhed up the sand after us as Marcel carried me away like it was angry that I'd escaped. As I stared wearily, a spark of color caught my unfocused eyes-a small flash of fire was dancing on the black water, far out in the bay. The image made no sense, and I wondered how conscious I was.

My head swirled with the memory of the black, churning water of being so lost that I couldn't find it up or down. So, lost... but somehow Marcel...

'How did you find me?' I rasped.

'I was searching for you,' he told me. He was half-jogging through the rain, up the beach toward the road. 'I followed the tire tracks to your truck, and then I heard you scream...' He shuddered. 'Why would you jump, Bell? Didn't you notice that it's turning into a hurricane out here? Couldn't you have waited for me?' Anger filled his tone as the relief faded.

'Sorry,' I muttered. 'It was stupid.'

'Yeah, it was really stupid,' he agreed, drops of rain shaking free of his hair as he nodded. 'Look, do you mind saving the stupid stuff for when I'm around? I won't be able to concentrate if I think you're jumping off cliffs behind my back.'

'Sure,' I agreed. 'No problem.' I sounded like a chain-smoker. I tried to clear my throat and then winced; the throat-clearing felt like stabbing a knife down there. 'What happened today? Did you... find her?' It was my turn to shudder, though I wasn't so cold here, right next to his ridiculous body heat.

Marcel shook his head. He was still more running than walking as he headed up the road to his house. 'No. She took off into the water-the bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That's why I raced home- I was afraid she was going to double back swimming. You spend so much time on the beach...' He trailed off, a catch in his throat.

'Sam came back with you... is everyone else home, too?' I hoped they weren't still out searching for her.

'Yeah. Sort of.'

I tried to read his expression, squinting into the hammering rain. His eyes were tight with worry or pain.

The words that hadn't made sense before suddenly did. 'You said... hospital. Before, to Sam. Is someone hurt? Did she fight you?' My voice jumped up an octave, sounding strange with hoarseness.

Marcel's eyes tightened again. 'It doesn't look so great right now.'

Abruptly, I felt sick with guilt-felt truly horrible about the brainless cliff dive. Nobody needed to be worrying about me right now. What a stupid time to be reckless.

'What can I do?' I asked.

At that moment, the rain stopped. I hadn't realized we were already back at Marcel's house until he walked through the door. The storm pounded against the roof.

'You can stay here,' Marcel said as he dumped me on the short couch. 'I mean it right here I'll get you some dry clothes.'

I let my eyes adjust to the darkroom while Marcel banged around in his bedroom. The cramped front room

seemed so empty without Billy, almost desolate. It was strangely ominous-probably just because I knew where he was.

Marcel was back in seconds. He threw a pile of gray cotton at me. 'These will be huge on you, but it's the best I've got. I'll-a, step outside so you can change.'

'Don't go anywhere. I'm too tired to move yet. Just stay with me.'

Marcel sat on the floor next to me, his back against the couch. I wondered when he'd slept last. He looked as exhausted as I felt.

He leaned his head on the cushion next to mine and yawned. 'Guess I could rest for a minute...'

His eyes closed. I let my slide shut, too.

Poor Harry. Poor Sue. I knew Mr. Anderson was going to be beside himself. Harry was one of his best friends. Despite Maggie's negative take on things, I hoped fervently that Harry would pull through. For Mr. Anderson's sake. For Sue's and Leah's and Seth's...

Billy's sofa was right next to the radiator, and I was warm now, despite my soaked clothes. My lungs ached in a way that pushed me toward unconsciousness rather than keeping me awake. I wondered vaguely if it was wrong to sleep... or was I getting drowned mixed up with concussions...? Marcel began softly snoring, and the sound of it soothed like a lullaby. I fell asleep quickly.

For the first time in an exceptionally long time, my dream was just a normal dream.

Just a blurred wandering through old memories-blinding bright visions of the Pa-sun, my mother's face, a



ramshackle treehouse, a faded quilt, a wall of mirrors, a flame on the black water... I forgot each of them as soon as the picture changed.

The last picture was the only one that stuck in my head. It was meaningless just to sit on a stage. A balcony at night, a painted moon hanging in the sky. I watched the girl in her nightdress lean on the railing and talk to herself.

Meaningless... but when I slowly struggled back to consciousness, Juliet was on my mind.

Marcel was still asleep; he'd slumped down to the floor and his breathing was deep and even. The house was darker now than before, it was black outside the window. I was stiff but warm and almost dry. The inside of my throat burned with every breath I took.

I was going to have to get up at least to get a drink. But my body just wanted to be-a here limp, to never move again. Instead of moving, I thought about Juliet some more.

I wondered what she would have done if Romeo had left her, not because he was banished, but because he lost interest. What if Rosalind had given him the time of day, and he'd changed his mind? What if, instead of marrying Juliet, he'd just disappeared?

I thought I knew how Juliet would feel.

She wouldn't go back to her old life, not really. She wouldn't ever have moved on; I was sure of that. Even if she'd lived until she was old and gray, every time she closed her eyes, it would have been Romeo's face she saw behind her lids.

She would have accepted that, eventually.

I wondered if she would have married Paris in the end, just to please her parents, to keep the peace. No, no, I decided. But then, the story didn't say much about Paris. He was just a stick figure-a placeholder, a threat, a deadline to force her hand.

What if there were more to Paris?

What if Paris had been Juliet's friend? Her absolute best friend? What if he was the only one, she could confide in about the whole devastating thing with Romeo? The one person who understood her and made her feel halfway human again? What if he was patient and kind? What if he took care of her? What if Juliet knew she couldn't survive without him? What if he loved her, and wanted her to be happy?

And... What if she loved Paris? Not like Romeo. Nothing like that, of course. But enough that she wanted him to be happy, too?

Marcel's slow, deep breathing was the only sound in the room-like a lullaby hummed to a child, like the whisper of a rocking chair, like the ticking of an old clock when you had nowhere you needed to go...It was the sound of comfort.

If Romeo was gone, never coming back, would it have mattered whether Juliet had taken Paris up on his offer? She should have tried to settle into the leftover scraps of life that were left behind. That would have been as close to happiness as she could get.

I sighed and then groaned when the sigh scraped my throat. I was reading too much into the story.

Romeo wouldn't change his mind. That's why people still remembered his name, always twined with hers: Romeo and Juliet. That's why it was a delightful story.

'Juliet gets dumped and ends up with Paris' would have never been a hit.

I closed my eyes and drifted again, letting my mind wander away from the stupid play I did not want to think about anymore. I thought about reality instead of jumping off the cliff and what a brainless mistake that had been. And not just the cliff, but the motorcycles and the whole irresponsible Evil Knievel bit. What if something bad happened to me? What would that do to Mr. Anderson? Harry's heart attack had pushed everything suddenly into perspective for me. The perspective that I did not want to see because if I admitted to the truth of it-it would mean that I would have to change my ways. Could I live like that?

Maybe... It would not be easy; in fact, it would be downright miserable to give up my hallucinations and try to be a grown-up. But I should do it. And I could. If I had Marcel.

I could not make that decision right now. It hurt too much. I would think about something else.

Images from my ill-considered afternoon stunt rolled through my head while I tried to produce something pleasant to think about... the feel of the air as I fell, the blackness of the water, the thrashing of the current... Marcel's face... I lingered there for a long time. Marcel's warm hands, trying to beat life back into me... the stinging rain flung down by the purple clouds... the strange fire on the waves...

There was something familiar about that flash of color on top of the water. Of course, it could not be fire-

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car squelching through the mud on the road outside. I heard it stop in front of the house, and doors started opening and closing. I thought about sitting up and then decided against that idea.

Billy's voice was easily identifiable, but he kept it uncharacteristically low so that it was only a gravelly grumble.

The door opened, and the light flicked on. I blinked, momentarily blind.

Maggie startled awake, gasping, and jumping to his feet.

'Sorry,' Billy grunted. 'Did we wake you?'

My eyes slowly focused on his face, and then, as I could read his expression, they filled with tears.

'Oh, no, Billy!' I moaned.

He nodded slowly, his expression hard with grief. Maggie hurried to his father and took one of his hands. The pain made his face suddenly childlike—it looked odd on top of the man's body.

Sam was right behind Billy, pushing his chair through the door. His normal composure was absent from his agonized face.

'I'm so sorry,' I whispered.

Billy nodded. 'It's going to be hard all around.'

'Where's Mr. Anderson?'

'Your dad is still at the hospital with Sue. There are a lot of... arrangements to be made.'

I swallowed hard.

'I'd better get back there,' Sam mumbled, and he ducked hastily out the door.

Billy pulled his hand away from Marcel, and then he rolled himself through the kitchen toward his room.

Maggie stared after him for a minute, then came to sit on the floor beside me again. He put his face in his hands. I rubbed his shoulder, wishing I could think of anything to say.

After a long moment, Marcel caught my hand and held it to his face.

‘How are you feeling? Are you okay? I should have taken you to a doctor or something.’ He sighed.

‘Don't worry about me,’ I croaked.

He twisted his head to look at me. His eyes were rimmed in red. ‘You don't look so good.’

‘I don't feel so good, either I guess.’

‘I'll go get your truck and then take you home-you probably ought to be there when Mr. Anderson gets back.’

‘Right...’

I lay listlessly on the sofa while I waited for him. Billy was silent in the other room. I felt like a peeping tom, peering through the cracks at a private sorrow that wasn't mine.

It didn't take Maggie long. The roar of my truck's engine broke the silence before I expected it. He helped me up from the couch without speaking, keeping his arm around my shoulder when the chilly air outside made me shiver. He took the driver's seat without asking, and then pulled me next to his side to keep his arm tight around me. I leaned my head against his chest.

‘How will you get home?’ I asked.

‘I'm not going home. We still haven't caught the bloodsucker, remember?’ My next shudder had nothing to do with the cold.

It was a quiet ride after that. The chilly air had woken me up. My mind was alert, and it was working extremely hard and amazingly fast.

What if? What was the right thing to do?

I couldn't imagine my life without Marcel now-I cringed away from the idea of even trying to imagine that. Somehow, he'd become essential to my survival.

But to leave things the way they were... was that cruel, as Lance had accused?

I remembered wishing that Marcel was my brother. I realized now that all I wanted to be a claim on him. It didn't feel brotherly when he held me like this. It just felt nice-warm, comforting, and familiar. Safe. Marcel was a safe harbor.

I could stake a claim. I had that much in my power.

I'd have to tell him everything, I knew that. It was the only way to be fair. I'd have to explain it right so that he'd know I wasn't settling, that he was much too good for me. He already knew I was broken, that part wouldn't surprise him, but he'd need to know the extent of it. I'd even have to admit that I was crazy-explain about the voices I heard. He'd need to know everything before he decided.

But even as I recognized that necessity, I knew he would take me despite it all. He wouldn't even pause to think it through. I would have to commit to this-commit as much of me as there was left, every one of the broken pieces. It was the only way to be fair to him. Would I?

Could I?

Would it be so wrong to try to make Marcel happy? Even if the love I felt for him was no more than a weak echo of

what I was capable of, even if my heart was far away, wandering and grieving after my fickle Romeo, would it be so very wrong?

Marcel stopped the truck in front of my spooky house, cutting the engine so it was suddenly silent. Like so many other times, he was in tune with my thoughts now.

He threw his other arm around me, crushing me against his chest, binding me to him. Again, this felt nice. Like being a whole person again.

I thought he would be thinking of Harry, but then he spoke, and his tone was apologetic. 'Sorry. I know you don't feel exactly the way I do, Bell. I swear I don't mind. I'm just so glad you're okay that I could sing and that's something no one wants to hear.' He laughed his throaty laugh in my ear.

My breathing kicked up a notch, sanding the walls of my throat.

Wouldn't Marcel, indifferent as he might be, want me to be as happy as possible under the circumstances? Wouldn't enough friendly emotion linger for him to want that much for me? I thought he would. He wouldn't begrudge me this: giving just a small bit of love he didn't want to my friend Marcel. It wasn't the same love at all.

Maggie pressed his warm cheek against the top of my hair.

If I turned my face to the side, if I pressed my lips against his bare shoulder... I knew without any doubt what would follow. It would be extremely easy. There would be no need for explanations tonight.

But could I, do it? Could I betray my absent heart to save my pathetic life? Butterflies assaulted my stomach as I thought of turning my head.

And then, as clearly as if I were in immediate danger, Marcel's velvet voice whispered in my ear.

'Be happy,' he told me.

I froze... to that look...

Marcel felt me stiffen and released me automatically, reaching for the door.

Wait, I wanted to say. Just a minute... But I was still locked in place, listening to the echo of Marcel's voice in my head.

Storm-cooled air blew through the cab of the truck.

'OH!' The breath whooshed out of Marcel like someone had punched him in the gut. 'Holy crap!'

He slammed the door and twisted the keys in the ignition at the same moment. His hands were shaking so hard I didn't know how he managed it.

'What's wrong?'

He revved the engine too fast; it sputtered and faltered.

'Fallen Angel,' he spits out.

The blood rushed from my head and left me dizzy. 'How do you know?'

'Because I can smell it. Damn it!'

Marcel's eyes were wild, raking the dark street. He barely seemed aware of the tremors that were rolling through his body. 'Phase or get her out of here?' he hissed at himself.



He looked down at me for a split second, taking in my horror-struck eyes and white face, and then he scanned the street again.

‘Right. Get you out.’

The engine caught with a roar. The tires squealed as he spun the truck around, turning toward our only escape. The headlights washed across the pavement, lit the front line of the black forest, and finally glinted off a car parked across the street from my house.

‘Stop!’ I gasped.

It was a black car, a car I knew. I might be the furthest thing from an audiophile, but I could tell you everything about that car. It was a Mercedes S 55 AMG. I knew the horsepower and the color of the interior. I knew the feel of the powerful engine purring through the frame. I knew the rich smell of the leather seats and the way the extra-dark tint made noon look like dusk through those windows.

It was Chiaz's car.

‘Stop!’ I cried again, louder this time because Marcel was gunning the truck down the street.

‘What?’

‘It is not Maggie. Stop, stop! I want to go back.’

He stomped on the brake so hard I had to catch myself against the dashboard.

‘What?’ he asked again, aghast. He stared at me with horror in his eyes.

‘It is Chiaz's car! It is Barns. I know it.’

He watched dawn break across my face, and a violent tremor rocked his frame.

‘Hey, calm down, Maggie. It is okay. No danger, see? Relax.’

‘Yeah, calm,’ he panted, putting his head down and closing his eyes. While he concentrated on not exploding into a wolf, I started out the back window at the black car.

It was just Chiaz, I told myself. Don't expect anything more. Esme... Stop right there, I told myself. Just Chiaz. That was plenty. More than I'd ever hoped to have again.

‘There's an angel in your house,’ Marcel hissed. ‘And you want to go back?’

I glanced at him, ripping my unwilling eyes off the Mercedes-terrified that it would disappear the second I looked away.

‘Of course,’ I said, my voice blank with surprise at his question. Of course, I wanted to go back.

Marcel's face hardened while I stared at him, congealing into the bitter mask that I'd thought was gone for good. Just before he had the mask in place, I caught the spasm of betrayal that flashed in his eyes. His hands were still shaking. He looked ten years older than me.

He took a deep breath. ‘You're sure it's not a trick?’ he asked in a slow, heavy voice.

‘It's not a trick. It's from Chiaz. Take me back!’

A shudder rippled through his wide shoulders, but his eyes were flat and emotionless.

‘No.’

‘Maggie, it's okay-’

‘No. Take yourself back, Bell.’ His voice was a slap- I flinched as the sound of it struck me. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

‘Look, Bell,’ he said in the same hard voice. ‘I can't go back. Treaty or no treaty, that's my enemy in there.’

‘It's not like that-’

‘I must tell Sam right away. This changes things. We can't be caught on their territory.’ ‘Maggie, it's not a war!’

He didn't listen. He put the truck in neutral and jumped out the door, leaving it running.

‘Bye, bell,’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘I hope you don't die.’ He sprinted into the darkness, shaking so hard that his shape seemed blurred; he disappeared before I could open my mouth to call him back.

Remorse pinned me against the seat for one long second. What had I just done to Marcel?’

But Remorse couldn't hold me exceptionally long.

I slid across the seat and put the truck back in drive. My hands were shaking as hard as Maggie's had been, and this took a minute of concentration. Then I carefully turned the truck around and drove it back to my house.

It was very dark when I turned off the headlights. Mr. Anderson had left in such a hurry that he'd forgotten to leave the porch lamp on. I felt a pang of doubt, staring at the house, deep in shadow. What if it was a trick?

I looked back at the black car, almost invisible in the night. No, I knew that car.

Still, my hands were shaking even worse than before as I reached for the key above the door. When I grabbed the doorknob to unlock it, it twisted easily under my hand. I let the door fall open. The hallway was black.

I wanted to call out a greeting, but my throat was too dry. I couldn't quite seem to catch my breath.

I took a step inside and fumbled for the light switch. It was so black-like the black water... Where was that switch?

Just like the black water, with the orange flame flickering impossibly on top of it. The flame that couldn't be a fire, but what then...? My fingers traced the wall, still searching, still shaking- suddenly, something Marcel had told me this afternoon echoed in my head, finally sinking in... She took off into the water, he'd said. The bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That's why I raced home -I was afraid she was going to double back swimming.

My hand froze in its searching, my whole body froze into place, as I realized why I recognized the strange orange color of the water.

Maggie's hair, blowing wild in the wind, the color of fire...

She'd been right there. Right there in the harbor with me and Marcel. If Sam hadn't been there if it had been just the two of us...? I couldn't breathe or move. The light flicked on, though my frozen hand had still not found the switch.

I blinked at the sudden light and saw that someone was there, waiting for me.

VISITOR UNNATURALLY STILL AND WHITE, WITH LARGE BLACK EYES intent on my face, my visitor waited perfectly motionless in the center of the halt, beautiful beyond imagining.

My knees trembled for a second, and I nearly fell. Then I hurled myself at her.

‘Olivia, oh, Olivia!’ I cried as I slammed into her.

I’d forgotten how hard she was; it was like running headlong into a wall of cement.

‘Bell?’ There was a strange mingling of relief and confusion in her voice.

I locked my arms around her, gasping to inhale as much of the scent of her skin as possible. It wasn’t like anything else— not floral or spice, citrus, and musk. No perfume in the world could compare. My memory hadn’t done it justice.

I did not notice when the gasping turned into something else—I only realized I was sobbing when Olivia dragged me to the living room couch and pulled me into her lap. It was like curling up into a cool stone, but a stone that was contoured comfortably to the shape of my body. She rubbed my back in a gentle rhythm, waiting for me to get control of myself.

‘I’m... sorry,’ I blubbered. ‘I’m just... so happy... to see you!’

‘It is okay, Bell. Everything is okay.’

‘Yes,’ I bawled. And, for once, it seemed that way.

Olivia sighed. ‘I’d forgotten how exuberant you are,’ she said, and her tone was disapproving.

I looked up at her through my streaming eyes. Olivia’s neck was tight, straining away from me, her lips pressed together firmly. Her eyes were black as pitch.

‘Oh,’ I puffed, as I realized the problem. She was thirsty. And I smelled appetizing. It had been a while since I’d had to think about that.

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s my fault. It’s been too long since I hunted. I shouldn’t let myself get so thirsty. But I was in a hurry today.’ The look she directed at me then was a glare. ‘Speaking of which, would you like to explain to me how you’re alive?’

That brought me up short and stopped the sobs. I realized what must have happened immediately, and why Olivia was here.

I swallowed loudly, ‘you saw me fall.’

‘No,’ she disagreed, her eyes narrowing. ‘I saw you jump.’

I pursed my lips as I tried to think of an explanation that wouldn’t sound nuts.

Olivia shook her head. ‘I told him this would happen, but he didn’t believe me. ‘Karly promised,’ her voice imitated him so perfectly that I froze in shock while the pain ripped through my torso. “Don’t be looking for her future, either’ ‘she continued to quote him.’ ‘We’ve done enough damage.’

‘But just because I’m not looking, doesn’t mean I don’t see’ she went on. ‘I was not tracking you, I swear, Bell. It is just that I am already attuned to you... when I saw you jumping, I did not think, I just got on a plane. I knew I would be too late, but I could not do anything. And then I get here, thinking I could help Mr. Anderson somehow, and you drive up.’ She shook her head, this time in confusion. Her voice was strained. ‘I saw you go into the water, and I waited and waited for you to come up, but you did not. What happened? And how could you do that to Mr.

Anderson? Did you stop to think about what this would do to him? And my brother?

Do you have any idea what Marcel?

I cut her off then as soon as she said his name. I had let her go on, even after I realized the misunderstanding she was under, just to hear the perfect bell tone of her voice. But it was time to interrupt.

‘Olivia, I wasn't committing suicide.’

She eyed me dubiously. ‘Are you saying you didn't jump off a cliff?’

‘No, but...’ I grimaced. ‘It was for recreational purposes only.’ Her expression hardened.

‘I'd seen some of Marcel's friend's cliff diving,’ I insisted. ‘It looked like... fun, and I was bored...’ She waited.

‘I did not think about how the storm would affect the currents. I did not think about the water much at all.’

Olivia did not buy it. I could see that she still thought I had been trying to kill myself. I decided to redirect. ‘So, if you saw me go in, why didn't you see Marcel?’

She cocked her head to the side, distracted.

I continued. ‘It is true that I would have drowned if Marcel had not jumped in after me. Well, okay, there is nothing about it. But he did, and he pulled me out, and he towed me back to shore, though I was kind of out for that part. It could not have been more than a minute that I was under before he grabbed me. How come you did not see that?’

Part: 16

Acting of us-

You got to love the p\*ssy fart vid- I do!

His eyes bulged, and his face turned a strange, sallow color under the tan exterior. He looked like he was about to be sick. Marcel noticed because he held the hand I moved. 'Whatever's that I ponder with suspicion?' He traded hands, examining my right. 'This is your funny scare, the cold one.' He looked at it closer, with new eyes, and gasped.

'Naturally, it's what you think it is,' I whispered. Love is not something you find. Love is something that finds you. 'He kissed me so hot, startlingly, and tastefully.'

Let us always meet each other with a smile, for the smile is the start of love. Keep love in your heart. Life without it is like a sunless garden when the flowers are dead. Love is composed of a solo soul inhabiting two bodies. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have treasured you, so your commitment to fall in love with one another.

True love is like ghosts, which everyone talks about, and few have seen. You cannot blame gravity for falling in love. Immature love says: I love you because I need you. Mature love says 'I need you because I love you. Love finds each other that has caught fire as no other can do. It is quite sympathetic, conjoint self-assurance, distribution, and forgiving. It is faithfulness through good and wicked eras. It settles for less than faultlessness and makes pin money for human weaknesses. Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye. The best thing to hold onto in life is each other. Love is life. And if you miss love, you miss life.

'Definitely- not.' I said curtly. I could not imagine the wolves running faster than angels. When the Barn's ran, they all but turned invisible with speed. 'As a result, tell me something I don't know,' he said. 'Something about angels. How did you stand it, being around them? Didn't it creep you out?' I have



never found anybody who could stand to accept the demonstrative daily love I feel in me and give back as good as I give. Love is when the other person's happiness is more important than your own.

It did mean something to me. My tone made him thoughtful for a moment.

'Say, why would your bloodsucker kill that James, anyway?' he asked suddenly. 'He was trying to kill me I feel not all the way yet some shit like that- it was like a game for him. He lost. Do you remember last spring when I was in Kennywood at night?'

'But if he kissed you...?'

'Shouldn't you be... dating someone else?'

(Jenny never wanted this; she wanted him more than they thought.)

He choked. Of any kind, you happen to be feeling the twinkling is fine with them. That is what real love amounts to letting an individual be what he is. In-Lovers- can help each other. A loyal friend is nobody who lets you have total freedom to be yourself- as well as particularly to sense, or nonsense. Love like a rose flower cannot blossom without sunshine, and man cannot live without love.

'Marcel saved me twice from falling for someone, not for me, I feel that.' I believed. 'He sucked the kiss out of me here and there- you know, like with a never before.' I twitched as the pain lashed around the edges of the hole. The sweetest of all sounds is that of the voice of the woman we love. But I was not the only one twitching. I could feel Marcel's whole body trembling next to mine. Imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than the times gone by.

Those dreams are more prevailing than facts. That always hopes for victories over experience. That laughter is the only cure for sorrow. And love is stronger than death. Existence deeply loved by someone gives you *métier*, while loving somebody severely gives you nerve.

~\*~

In the car on the speed drive:

Even the car shook.

‘At least we have each other,’ he said, clearly comforted by the thought.

I was comforted, too. ‘At least there's that,’ I agreed.

And when we were together, it was fine. But Marcel had a horrible, dangerous job he felt compelled to do, and so I was often alone, stuck in a snubber for safety, with nothing to do to keep my mind off any of my worries. I felt awkward, always taking up space at Marcel's. I did some studying for another life test that was coming up next week, but I could only look at the math for so long.

When I do not have anything obvious to do in my hands, spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier. I felt like I ought to be making conversation with Marcel under the pressure of normal societal rules. But Marcel was not one to fill up the long silences, and so the awkwardness continued. Oh like- stolen kisses are always sweetest and are the best ones I can have!

She criticized lightly about the increase in the boy's cravings from all their extra successively, but it was easy to see she did not mind taking care of them. It was not hard to be with her; we were both wolf girls now. I tried hanging out at

Maggie's place in the afternoon night, for a change and more than only girls can do for girls. At first, it was nice.

Maggie was cheerful sitting still lusting for me. I go with the flow behind her while she flits around her little house and yard, scrubbing at the spotless floor, fixing a broken hinge, pulling a tiny weed, tugging a string of fabric through an antique loom, and always cooking, too. A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become unnecessary. Kindness in words creates confidence. Sympathy in thinking creates a degree. Kindheartedness in giving creates in-love with lovers, or so I feel like this day.

But Sam checked in after I was there for a few hours. I only stayed long enough to make certain that Marcel was fine and there was no news, and then

I had to discharge, like she. 'It's not always pretty- yet that is love.' The aura of love and contentment that surrounded them was harder to take in concentrated doses, with no one else around to thin it like this.

Love does not make the world go around. Love is what makes the ride meaningful. So that left me wandering the beach, pacing the length of the rock-strewn crescent back and forth, repeatedly, and more, and so on.

Sh\*t! You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and fondness than your physical wants and needs, in addition to that person not to be found anywhere. You physically, as much as any person in the entire cosmos deserve your love and affection.

Alone time was not good for me. Thanks to the new honesty with Marcel, I had been talking and thinking about the Barn's way too much. I have decided to stick with love.

Detestation is too great a weight to tolerate. On the other hand, heat is easier for some, don't you see that?

No matter how I tried to distract myself and I had plenty to think of: I was honestly and desperately worried about Marcel- I was getting in deeper and deeper with Marcel without ever having consciously decided to progress in that direction and I did not know what to do about it- none of these very real, very deserving of thought, very pressing concerns could take my mind off the pain in my chest for long. At the end of the day, I could not even walk to any further extent, because I could not breathe. I sat down on a patch of semi-dry rocks and curled up in a ball. We love life, not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving.

His warmth made me tremble, but at least I could breathe with him there. 'I'm adulterating your spring break,' Marcel suspects himself as we walk back up the shore. 'On no account, you are not. I did not have any plans. I do not think I like spring disruptions, anyway.' A teen girl knows the face of the man she loves as a seafarer knows the open sea. Marcel found me like that, and I could tell from his expression that he understood. 'Sorry,' he said right away. He pulled me up from the ground and wrapped both arms around my shoulders. I had not realized that I was cold until then.

~\*~

Marcel is so cute- saying:

Boob play- is like waxing on and waxing off.

~\*~

Vagina play- is like painting the fence.

~\*~

Clitoris play- is like nipples- would be sand the floor.

~\*~

Butt play of hers- is like side by side.

~\*~

Just think of this and it's all good! And you can touch a girl well!

~\*~

Piss the day started, and I am in bed- messed up in the head- God- GOO!

'I'll take tomorrow morning off. The others can run without me. We'll do something fun. 'Fun is exactly what you need. Hammam...' he gazed out across the heaving ashen waves, deliberating. As his eyes glanced at the skyline, he had a flash of stimulus.' The word seemed out of place in my life right now, barely comprehensible, bizarre.

'Fun? Is it not?'

Part: 17

Silence

'Sh-h!'

'Shouldn't somebody has mentioned this to me earlier?' I whispered angrily. 'I mean, I wanted to be a... to be one of you! Shouldn't somebody have, already like, explained the rules to me?'

Olivia chuckled once at my reaction. 'It is not that complicated, Bell. There is only one core restriction-and if you think about it, you can figure it out for yourself.'

I thought about it. 'Nope, I have no idea.'

She shook her head, disappointed. 'It is too obvious. We just must keep our existence a secret.'

'Oh,' I mumbled. It was obvious.

'It makes sense, and most of us don't need policing,' she continued. 'But, after a few centuries, sometimes one of us gets bored. Or crazy. I do not know. And then the Ministry steps in before it can compromise them, or the rest of us.'

'So-o Marcel...'

'Is planning to flout that in their city-the city they have secretly held for three thousand years, since the time of the Etruscans. They are so protective of their city that they do not allow hunting within its walls. Volterra is the safest city in the world-from angel attacks at the very least.'

'But you said they did not leave. How do they eat?'

This is what she becomes because of me... what do you think of here... do you like her or heat? Are you going to hate her for this?

~\*~

'They do not leave. They bring in their food from the outside, from quite far away sometimes. It gives their guard something to do when they are not out annihilating mavericks. Or protecting Volterra from exposure...'

'From situations like this one, like Marcel,' I finished her sentence. It was amazingly easy to say his name now. I was not sure what the difference was. Maybe because- I was not planning to live much longer without seeing him. Or at all, if we were too late. It was comforting to know that I would have an easy out.

'I doubt they've ever had a situation quite like this,' she muttered, disgusted.

'You don't get a lot of suicidal angels.'

The sound that escaped out of my mouth was incredibly quiet, but Olivia seemed to understand that it was a cry of pain. She wrapped her thin, strong arm around my shoulders.

'We'll do what we can, Bell. It is not over yet.'

'Not yet.' I let her comfort me, though I knew she thought our chances were poor. 'And the Ministry will get us if we mess up.' Olivia stiffened. 'You say that like it's a good thing.'

I shrugged.

'Knock it off, Bell, or we're turning around in New York and going back to Pittsburgh.'

'What?'

'You know what. If we are too late for Marcel, I am going to do me damnedest to get you back to Mr. Anderson, and I do not want any trouble from you. Do you understand that?'

'Sure, Olivia.'

She pulled back slightly so that she would glare at me. 'No trouble.'

'Scout's honor,' I muttered.

She rolled her eyes.

'Let me concentrate, now. I am trying to see what he is planning.'

She left her arm around me, but let her head fall back against the seat and closed her eyes. She pressed her free hand to the side of her face, rubbing her fingertips against her temple.

I watched her in fascination for a long time. Eventually, she became utterly motionless, her face like a stone sculpture. The minutes passed, and if I did not know better, I would have thought she had fallen asleep. I did not dare interrupt her to ask what was going on.

I wished there were something safe for me to think about. I could not allow myself to consider the horrors we were headed toward, or, more horrific yet, the chance that we might fail-not if I wanted to keep from screaming aloud.

I could not anticipate anything, either. If I were very, incredibly lucky, I would somehow be able to save Marcel. But I was not so stupid as to think that saving him would mean that I could stay with him. I was no different, no more special than I had been before. There would be no new reason for him to want me now. Seeing him and losing him again...

I fought back against the pain. This was the price I had to pay to save his life. I would pay for it.

They showed a movie, and my neighbor got headphones. Sometimes, I watched the figures moving across the little screen, but I could not even tell if the movie was supposed to be a romance or a horror film.

After an eternity, the plane began to descend toward New York City. Olivia remained in her trance. I dithered, reaching out to touch her, only to pull my hand back again. This happened a dozen times before the plane touched down with a jarring impact.



‘Olivia,’ I finally said. ‘Olivia, we have to go.’

I touched her arm.

Her eyes came open very slowly. She shook her head from side to side for a moment.

‘Anything new?’ I asked in a faint voice, conscious of the man listening on the other side of me.

‘Not exactly,’ she breathed in a voice I could barely catch. ‘He’s getting closer. He is deciding how he is going to ask.’

We had to run for our connection, but that was good-better than having to wait. As soon as the plane was in the air, Olivia closed her eyes and slid back into the same stupor as before. I waited as patiently as I could. When it was dark again, I opened the window to stare out into the flat black that was no better than the window shade.

I was grateful that I had had so many months’ practices with controlling my thoughts. Instead of dwelling on the terrifying possibilities that, no matter what Olivia said, I did not intend to survive, I concentrated on lesser problems. Like, what I was going to say to Mr. Anderson if I got back: ‘That was a thorny enough problem to occupy several hours, and Marcel?’

He had promised to wait for me, but did that promise still to apply? Would I end up home alone in Pittsburgh, with no one at all? I did not want to survive, no matter what happened.

It felt like seconds later when Olivia shook my shoulder-I had not realized I had fallen asleep.

‘Bell,’ she hissed, her voice a little too loud in the darkened cabin full of sleeping humans.

I was not disoriented I had not been out long enough for that.

‘What's wrong?’

Olivia's eyes gleamed in the dim light of a reading lamp in the row behind us.

‘It's not wrong.’ She smiled fiercely. ‘It is right. They are deliberating, but they have decided to tell him no.’

‘The Ministry?’ I muttered, groggy.

‘Of course, Bell, keep up. I can see what they are going to say.’

‘Tell me.’

An attendant tiptoed down the aisle to us. ‘Can I get you, ladies, a pillow?’ His hushed whisper was a rebuke to our comparatively loud conversation.

‘No, thank you.’ Olivia beamed at him; her smile shockingly lovely.

The attendant's expression was dazed as he turned and stumbled his way back.

‘Tell me,’ I breathed silently.

She whispered into my ear. ‘They're interested in him- they think his talent could be useful. They are going to offer him a place with them.’

‘What will he say?’

‘I can't see that yet, but I'll bet it's colorful.’ She grinned again. ‘This is the first good news-the first break. They are intrigued; they truly do not want to destroy him-wasteful,’ that is the word Aron will use-and that may be enough to force him to get creative. The longer he spends on his plans, the better for us.’

It was not enough to make me hopeful, to make me feel the relief she felt. There were still so many ways that we could be too late. And if I did not get through the walls into the Ministry city, I would not be able to stop Olivia from dragging me back home.

‘Olivia?’

‘What?’

‘I am confused. How are you seeing this so clearly? And then other times, you see things far away that do not happen?’

Her eyes tightened. I wondered if she guessed what I was thinking of.

‘It is clear because it is immediate and close, and I am concentrating. The faraway things that come on their own—those are just glimpses, faint. Plus, I see my kind more easily than yours. Marcel is even easier because I am so attuned to him.’

‘You see me sometimes,’ I reminded her.

She shook her head. ‘Not as clear.’

I sighed. ‘I wish you could have been right about me. In the beginning, when you first saw things about me, before we even met...’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You saw me become one of you.’ I barely mouthed the words.

She sighed. ‘It was a possibility at the time.’

‘At the time,’ I repeated.

‘Actually, Bell...’ She hesitated, and then seemed to make a choice. ‘Honestly, it has all gotten beyond ridiculous. I am debating whether to just change you myself.’

I stared at her, frozen with shock. Instantly, my mind resisted her words. I could not afford that kind of hope if she changed her mind.

‘Did I scare you?’ she wondered. ‘I thought that's what you wanted.’

‘I do!’ I gasped. ‘Oh, Olivia, do it now! I could help you so much and I would not slow you down. Bite me!’

‘Shh,’ she cautioned. The attendant was looking in our direction again. ‘Try to be reasonable,’ she whispered. ‘We do not have enough time. We must get into Volterra tomorrow. You would be writhing in pain for days.’ She made a face. ‘And I don't think the other passengers would react well.’

I bit my lip, ‘If you don't do it now, you'll change your mind.’

‘No.’ She frowned- her expression unhappily. ‘I do not think I will. He will be furious, but what will he be able to do about it?’

My heartbeat faster. ‘Nothing at all.’

She laughed quietly and then sighed. ‘You have too much faith in me, Bell. I am not sure that I can. I will just end up killing you.’

‘I'll take my chances.’

‘You are so bizarre, even for a human.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Oh well, this is purely hypothetical at this point, anyway. First, we must live through tomorrow.’

‘Good point.’ But at least I had something to hope for if we did. If Olivia made good on her promise-and if she did not kill me-then Marcel could run after his distractions all he wanted, and I could follow. I would not let him be distracted.

When I was beautiful and strong, he would not want distractions.

‘Go back to sleep,’ she encouraged me. ‘I’ll wake you up when there’s something new.’

‘Right,’ I grumbled, certain that sleep was a lost cause now. Olivia pulled her legs up on the seat, wrapping her arms around them and leaning her forehead against her knees. She rocked back and forth as she concentrated.

I rested my head against the seat, watching her, and the next thing I knew, she was snapping the shade closed against the faint brightening in the eastern sky.

‘What’s happening?’ I mumbled.

‘They’ve told him no,’ she said quietly. I noticed at once that her enthusiasm was gone.

My voice choked in my throat with panic. ‘What’s he going to do?’

‘It was chaotic at first. I was only getting flickers; he was changing plans so quickly.’

‘What kinds of plans?’ I pressed.

‘There was a bad hour,’ she whispered. ‘He’d decided to go hunting.’ She looked at me, seeing the comprehension on my face.

‘In the city,’ she explained. ‘It got close. He changed his mind at the last minute.’

‘He wouldn't want to disappoint Chiaz,’ I mumbled. Not at the end. ‘Probably,’ she agreed.

‘Will there be enough time?’ As I spoke, there was a shift in the cabin pressure. I could feel the plane angling downward.

‘I'm hoping so-if he sticks to his latest decision, maybe.’

‘What is that?’

‘He's going to keep it simple. He is just going to walk out into the sun.’

Just walk out into the sun. That was all.

It would be enough. The image of Marcel in the meadow-glowing, shimmering like his skin was made of a million diamond facets-was burned into my memory. No human who saw that would ever forget. The Ministry could not allow it. Not if they wanted to keep their city inconspicuous.

I looked at the slight gray glow that shone through the opened windows.

‘We'll be too late,’ I whispered, my throat closing in panic.

She shook her head. ‘Right now, he is leaning toward the melodramatic. He wants the biggest audience possible, so he will choose the main plaza, under the clock tower. The walls are high there. He will wait till the sun is overhead.’

‘So-o we have till noon?’

‘If we are lucky. If he sticks with this decision.’

The pilot came on over the intercom, announcing, first in French and then in English, our imminent landing. The seat belt lights dinged and flashed. 'How far is it from Florence to Volterra?'

'That depends on how fast you drive... Bell?'

'Yes?'

She eyed me speculatively. 'How strongly are you opposed to grand theft auto?'

A bright yellow Porsche screamed to a stop a few feet in front of where I paced, the word TURBO scrawled in silver cursive across its back. Everyone beside me on the crowded airport sidewalk started.

'Hurry, Bell!' Olivia shouted impatiently through the open passenger window.

I ran to the door and threw myself in, feeling as though I might as well be wearing a black stocking over my head.

'Sheesh, Olivia,' I complained. 'Could you pick a more conspicuous car to steal?'

The interior was black leather, and the windows were tinted dark. It felt safer inside, like nighttime.

Olivia was already weaving, too fast, through the thick airport traffic-sliding through tiny spaces between the cars as I cringed and fumbled for my seat belt.

'The important question,' she corrected, 'is whether I could have stolen a faster car, and I do not think so.'

Part: 18

Godsend

‘I got lucky.’

‘I’m sure that will be very comforting at the roadblock.’

She laughed a laugh. ‘Trust me, Bell. If anyone sets up a roadblock, it will be behind us.’ She hit the gas then as if to prove her point.

I should have looked out the window as first the city of Florence and then the Tuscan landscape flashed past with blurring speed. This was my first trip anywhere, and my last, too. But Olivia’s driving frightened me, even though I knew I could trust her behind the wheel. And I was too tortured with anxiety to see the hills or the walled towns that looked like castles in the distance.

‘Do you see anything more?’

‘Something is going on,’ Olivia muttered. ‘Festival. The streets are full of people and red flags. What is the date today?’

I was not entirely sure. ‘The nineteenth, maybe?’

‘Well, that is ironic. It is Saint Marcellus Day.’

‘Which means?’

She chuckled darkly... ‘The city holds a celebration every year. As the legend goes, a Christian missionary, a Father Marcellus- of the Valium, in fact-drove all the angels from Volterra fifteen hundred years ago.

The story claims he was martyred in Rockville, still trying to drive away from the angel scourge.

Of course, that is nonsense-he never left the city. But that is where some of the superstitions about things like crosses and garlic come from. Father Marcellus used them so successfully. And angels do not trouble Volterra, so they must



work.' Her smile was sardonic. 'It has become more of a celebration of the city, and recognition for the police force-, Volterra is an amazingly safe city.

'The police get the credit.'

I realized what she meant when she said ironically. 'They're not going to be very happy if Marcel messes things up for them on St. Marcellus Day, are they?'

She shook her head, her expression grim. 'No. They'll act very quickly.'

I looked away, fighting against my teeth as they tried to break through the skin of my lower lip. Bleeding was not the best idea right now.

The sun was terrifyingly high in the pale blue sky.

'He's still planning on noon?' I checked.

'Yes. He decided to wait. And they are waiting for him.'

'Tell me what I have to do.'

She kept her eyes on the winding road-the needle on the speedometer was touching the far right on the dial.

'You do not have to do anything. He just must see you before he moves into the light. And he must see you before he sees me.'

'How are we going to work?'

A small red car was racing backward as Olivia zoomed around it.

'I'm going to get you as close as possible, and then you're going to run in the direction I point you.'

I nodded slightly... 'Try not to trip,' she added. 'We don't have time for a concussion today.'

I groaned. That would be just like me-ruining everything, destroying the world, in a moment of klutziness.

The sun continued to climb in the sky while Olivia raced against it. It was too bright: and that had me panicking. He would not feel the need to wait until noon.

'There,' Olivia said abruptly, pointing to the castle city atop the closest hill.

I stared at it, feeling the very first hint of a new kind of fear. Every minute since yesterday morning it seemed like a week ago-when Olivia had spoken his name at the foot of the stairs, there had been only one fear. And yet, now, as I stared at the ancient sienna walls and towers crowning the peak of the steep hill, I felt another, more selfish kind of dread thrill through me.

I supposed the city was incredibly beautiful. It terrified me.

'Volterra,' Olivia announced in a flat, icy voice.

VOLTERRA- WE BEGAN THE STEEP CLIMB, AND THE ROAD GREW CONGESTED. As we wound higher, the cars became too close together for Olivia to weave insanely between them anymore. We slowed to a crawl behind a little tan Peugeot.

'Olivia,' I moaned. The clock on the dash seemed to be speeding up.

'It's the only way in,' she tried soothing me. But her voice was too strained to comfort.

The cars continued to edge forward, one car length at a time. The sun beamed down brilliantly, seeming already overhead.

The cars crept one by one toward the city. As we got closer, I could see cars parked by the side of the road with people getting out to walk the rest of the way.

At first- I thought it was just impatience-something I could easily understand. But then we went around a switchback, and I could see the filled parking lot outside the city wall, the crowds of people walking through the gates. No one was allowed to drive through.

‘Olivia,’ I whispered urgently.

‘I know,’ she said. Her face was chiseled from ice.

Now that I was looking, and we were crawling slowly enough to see, I could tell that it was very windy. The people crowding toward the gate gripped their hats and tugged their hair out of their faces.

Their clothes billowed around them. I also noticed that red was everywhere. Red shirts, red hats, red flags dripping like long ribbons beside the gate, whipping in the wind as I watched, the brilliant crimson scarf one woman had tied around her hair was caught in a sudden gust.

It twisted up into the air above her, writhing like it was alive. She reached for it, jumping in the air, but it continued to flutter higher, a patch of bloody color against the dull, ancient walls.

‘Bell.’ Olivia spoke swiftly in a fierce, deep voice. ‘I cannot see what the guard here will decide now-if this does not work, you are going to have to go in alone. You are going to

have to run. Just keep running in the course they tell you to. Do not get lost.'

I repeated what I had said- the name repeatedly, trying to get it down. 'Or 'the clock tower,' if they speak English. I will go around and try to find a secluded spot somewhere behind the city where I can go over the wall.' I nodded two times...

'Marcel will be under the clock tower, to the north of the square. There is a narrow alleyway on the right, and he will be in the shadow there. You must get his attention before he can move into the sun.' I nodded furiously.

Olivia was near the front of the line. A man in a navy-blue uniform was directing the flow of traffic, turning the cars away from the full lot. They U-turned and headed back to find a place beside the road. Then it was Olivia's turn...

Interval: 2

Going in and out

Part: 1

Chapter: 5

Karly- Look at this old photo

The city of Nevaeh, and its mother of the past.

The man in uniform moved lazily, not paying attention. Olivia accelerated, edging around him, and heading towards the door.

He was still shouting something at us, and everyone was holding out, frantically waving to prevent the next car from following our bad example.

The man at the door was wearing a matching uniform. As we approached him, the crowd of tourists passed by,

accumulating on the sidewalks, looking curiously at the insistent and flashy Porsche.

The guard entered the middle of the street in front of us. Olivia carefully tilted the car before stopping.

The sun was beating against my window as I looked out now, and she was in the shadows. She quickly reached behind the seat and grabbed something from her bag.

The guard came around the car with an irritated expression and tapped on his window angrily.

She rolled the window halfway, and I watched him do a double take when he saw the face behind the dark glass.

'I'm sorry, only tour buses allowed in the city today, miss,' he says in English, with a heavy accent. He apologized to both of us now, as if he wanted to hear better news for the woman of striking beauty like us.

'It's a private visit,' Olivia said, flashing a cute flirty seductive smile.

Then there she reached her hand through the window, in the sunlight.

I froze until at that point I realized she was wearing a tanned glove.

She took her hand, still raised by typing her window, and pulled him into the car some. She put something in her palm and folded her fingers around her, saying you were going.

His face was dazed as he retrieved his hand and looked at the thick silver roll, he was now holding. The outside ticket was a thousand-dollar bill.

'Is this a joke?' He mumbled.

Olivia's smile was blinding.

'Only if you think it's funny.'

He looked at her, his eyes looking big.

I looked nervously at the clock on the dashboard. If Marcel stuck to his plan, we only had five minutes left.

'I'm in a bit of a hurry,' she says with a smile.

The defender blinked twice, then pushed the silver inside his garment. He walked away from the window and waved at us. None of the passing souls seemed to notice the hushed exchange. Olivia drove downtown, and we both sighed with satisfaction.

The street was very narrow, paved with the same shades of color as the faded cinnamon-brown buildings that darkened the street with their shade. It was like an alley.

Many red flags decorated the walls, spaced a few meters apart, flapping in the wind that whistled in the narrow alley. There were a lot of people, and the foot traffic slowed our progress.

'A little further,' Olivia encouraged me; I was clinging to the doorknob, ready to throw myself in the street as soon as she said the word.

She drove in rapid thrusts and sudden stops, and people in the crowd clenched their fists on us and said angry words that I was glad I could not understand.

She turned on the small path that could not have been intended for cars; Shocked people had to sneak into the doors that we scratched by.

We found another street at the end. The buildings were bigger here; they thought themselves together on it so that no sunlight touched the sidewalk- the red flags flying on either side almost met.

The crowd was thicker here than anywhere else. Olivia stopped the car. I had the door open before we stopped.

She pointed out where the street has widened into a bright opening point. 'There was at the southern end of the square. Cross straight, to the right of the clock tower. I will find a way around...

Her breath suddenly took, and when she spoke again, her voice was a sister.

'Are they everywhere?'

I froze in place, all the same, and all that, she pushed me out of the car. 'Forget them. You have two minutes. Come on, Bell, come on! she shouted as she got out of the car and talked about it.

I kept seeing Olivia melt into the shadows. I did not stop to close my door behind me. I pushed a heavy woman out of my way and ran flat, head down, paying little attention to anything all the same and all, uneven stones under my feet.

As I left the dark lane, I was blinded by sunlight beating down into the main square. The wind that became entangled in me, throwing my hair in my eyes, and blinding me more. It was no wonder I did not see the wall of flesh until I had slapped into it.

There was no way, no crevice between the tight bodies.

I pushed against them furiously, fighting hands that repulsed. I heard exclamations of irritation and even pain as I

fought my way through, all the same, and all, none were in a language I understood.

The faces were a blur of anger and surprise, surrounded by the ever-present red.

A young woman with deep brown hair scowling on me, and the green and white scarf wrapped around her neck looked like a horrible wound. A child, raised on a man's shoulders to see above the crowd, smiled at me, his lips distended on a set of plastic angel fangs.

The crowd was jostling around me, turning me in the wrong direction. I was glad the clock was so visible, or I would never keep my course straight.

All the same and all, both hands on the clock highlighted the unforgiving sun, and, although I pushed viciously against the crowd, I knew I was too late. I was not halfway there. I was not going to go.

I was stupid, slow, and human, even though I am not always stupid, and we were all going to die because of it.

I was hoping Olivia would come out. I hoped that she would see me in a dark shadow and know that I had failed so that she could go home to Ray.

I listened, above the angry exclamations, trying to hear discovery: the halex, the cry, as Marcel came into someone's point of view.

Nevertheless, there was a pause in the crowd- I could see a space bubble coming.

I pushed frantically towards it, not realizing until I bruised my shins against the bricks that there was a large square fountain placed in the center of the square.



I was almost crying with relief when I threw my leg overboard and ran across the water on my knees. It sprayed all around me as I beat my way through the pool.

Even in the sun, the wind was frigid, and the humidity made the cold painful.

Similarly, the fountain was very wide; it allowed me to cross the center of the square, then some in a few seconds.

I did not take a break when I hit the far edge- I used the low wall as a springboard, throwing myself into the mass of people.

They were moving easier for me now, avoiding the icy water that splashed with my dripping clothes as I ran. I looked at the clock once again.

A deep and burgeoning chime echoed in the square. He was beating in the stones under my feet. The children were crying, covering their ears. And I started screaming while I was running.

'Marcell!' I screamed, knowing it was useless. The crowd was too loud, and my voice was out of breath with effort. Yet I kept screaming.

The clock went off again. I ran in front of one in his mother's arms as her hair was almost white in the dazzling sunlight.

A circle of tall men, all dressed in red blazers, issued warnings as I passed through them. The clock went off repeatedly.

On the other side of the men in blazers, there was a pause in the crowd, the space between the sightseers that floor aimlessly around me.

My eyes looked over the vast narrow, dark passage to the right of the large square building under the tower.

I could not see the street level, there were still too many kids and teenagers on the way.

The clock struck again, and the rings howled.

Part: 2

Defeated

Just like me, he has gone...

It was harder to see now, more than ever. Without the children, teenagers, and pre-teens, to break the wind, he whipped me in the face and burned my eyes.

-And-

For my part, I could not be a hundred percent certain if that was the reason behind my tears, or if I cried in defeat as the clock hands rounded the face again, and the bell became more blurred.

A large family of ten stood closest to the opening of the driveway.

Both girls wore blue dresses, with matching ribbons tying their dark hair back.

The father was neither small nor tall.

It looked like I could see something bright in the shadows, just above his shoulder.

I rushed to them, trying to see beyond the scathing tears. The clock hands were spinning, and the little girl was clenching her fingers around one of the boy's long fingers.

The older girl, just tall on her mother, kissed her mother's body and looked in the shadows behind them.

As I watched, she killed herself on her mother's elbow and pointed to the darkness. The clock ticked and ticked, and I was so close to it now.

I was close enough to hear his high-pitched voice. His father looked at me with surprise now that I was bored of them, shaving Marcel's name over and over again.

The eldest daughter laughed and said something to her mother, gesticulating again impatiently in the shadows.

I swerved around the father; he squeezed the baby out of my way and sprinted for the dark violation behind them as the clock rolled over my head.

'Marcel, no! I gave in to myself, all the same, and everything, my voice was lost in the cry of the chime.

I could see it now. And I could see he could not see me.

It was him, no hallucination this time at all. Then I realized that my illusions were more imperfect than I had realized; they had never done him justice.

Marcel stood motionless like a statue, a few meters from the mouth of the alley. His eyes were closed, the rings under them deep purple, his arms relaxed on his sides, his palms facing forward.

His expression was very peaceful; as if he were dreaming of pleasant things. The marble skin of his chest was bare; there was a small pile of white cloth at his feet. The light reflected from the sidewalk of the square shone dimly from his skin.

I had never seen anything so beautiful, even as I ran, panting and screaming, I could appreciate it. And the last seven months did not mean anything. And his words in the forest meant nothing. And it did not matter if he did not want me. I would never want anything anyway and all that, him, no matter how long I lived.

The clock rose ahead, and it took a big step towards the light.

'No! I screamed.' Marcel, look at me!

He was not listening. He smiles very slightly. He raised his foot to take the step that would put him directly on the way to the sun.

I slammed the door so hard that the force would have thrown me to the ground if his arms had not caught me and held me back. He took my breath away and broke my head back.

His dark eyes opened slowly as the clock rose again.

He looked at me with a quiet surprise.

'Unbelievable,' he says, his exquisite voice full of wonder, a little amused. Joh was right.

'Marcel, I was still trying to halter, and my whole voice had no sound. 'You must come back to the shadows. You have to move!

He seemed perplexed. His hand grazed gently against my cheek. He did not seem to notice that I was trying to force him to come back. I could have pushed against the walls of the alley for all the progress I was making.

The clock went up, however, and not everyone reacted.

It was very strange because I knew we were both in mortal danger.

Yet, at that time, I felt good.

Overall, I could feel my heart running through my chest, blood pulsating hot and fast in my veins again. My lungs filled deep with the sweet smell that came from his skin. It was as if there had never been a hole in my chest. I was not perfectly healed, however, and everything, as if there had been no injury in the first place.

'I cannot believe how fast he was. I did not feel anything that they are exceptionally good,' he mused, closing his eyes again and pressing his lips against my hair. His voice was like honey and velvet. 'Death, which sucked honey from your breath, had no power yet over your beauty,' he murmured, 'and I recognized the line spoken by Romeo in the grave.' The clock exploded its final chime 'You feel the same as always,' he continued. So, it is hell. I do not care. I am going to take it. 'I'm not dead,' I interrupted.

'And neither do you! Please, Marcel, we must move. They cannot be far away!

I wrestled in his arms, and his forehead crisscrossed in confusion.

'What was it?' he asked politely.

'We are not dead, not yet!' However, we need to get out of here before the understanding of the department falters on his face while I was talking.

A few moments before, like, I could finish, he suddenly ripped off the edge of the shadow, making me spin effortlessly so that my back was tight against the brick wall, and his back

was for me as he faced me far down the alley. His arms spread wide, protective, before me.

I looked under his arm to see two dark shapes coming out of the darkness.

Greetings, gentlemen, 'Marcel's voice was calm and pleasant on the surface.' I do not think I am going to need your services today. I would appreciate it very much, however, if you want to send my thanks to your masters.

'Are we going to take this conversation to a more appropriate place? A soft voice murmured menacingly.'

'I don't think it's going to be necessary.' Marcel's voice was more difficult now. 'I know your instructions, Fredric.'

I did not break any rules.

'Fredric just wanted to emphasize the proximity of the sun,' says the other shadow in a soothing tone. They were both concealed in smoky grey coats that reached the ground and corrugated in the wind.'

'Let's find a better cover.'

'I will be right behind you,' said Marcel dryly. Bell, why not go back to the square and enjoy the festival?'

'No, bring the girl,' said the first shadow, injecting a cold-blooded murmur.

'I don't think so.' The pretext of civility has disappeared. Marcel's voice was flat and icy. His weight changed infinitely, and I could see that he was preparing to fight.

'No... I said the word.'

'Sh-h,' he murmured, 'only for me.'

'Fredric,' the second shadow, more reasonably savvy.

'Not here. He turned to Marcel.' Aron would just like to talk to you again if you have decided not to force our hand after all.

'Definitely,' agrees Marcel.

'All the same and everything, the girl becomes free.'

'I'm afraid it's not possible,' says the polite shadow with regret.

'We have rules to follow.'

'Then I fear that I will not be able to accept Aron's invitation, Eametri.'

'That's fine,' Fredric purrs. My eyes adapted to the deep shadow, and I could see that Fredric was very tall, tall, and thick on his shoulders. Its size reminded me of Emmah.

'Aron will be disappointed,' signed Eametri.

'I am sure he will survive the disappointment,' replied Marcel.

Fredric and Eametri flew closer to the mouth of the alley, extending slightly so that they could come to Marcel on both sides.

They wanted to force him deeper into the alley, to avoid a scene. No reflected light found access to their skin; they were safe inside their hooded coats.

Marcel did not move an inch. It was meant to protect me.

Suddenly, Marcel's head was whipping around, towards the darkness of the winding alley, and Eametri and Fredric did

the same, in response to a sound or movement too subtle for my senses.

'We're going to behave, are we going to?' A lilting voice told me in my head.

'There are young girls present.'

Olivia stumbled slightly on Marcel's side; his relaxed position. There was no indication of underlying tension. She looked so small, so fragile. His little arms wandered around like a children's house.

Yet Eamетtri and Fredric wash, their coats swirling slightly like a gust of wind winding down the alley. Fredric's face soared. They did not even like numbers.

'We are not alone,' she reminded them.

Eamетtri looked over his shoulder. A few meters from the square, the little family, with the girls in their red robes, looked at us.

The mother spoke urgently to her husband, her eyes on the five or two of us.

She looked aside when Eamетtri met her gaze. The man walked a few steps into the square and tapped one of the men in red blazers on the shoulder.

Eamетtri shook his head. 'Please, Marcel, let's be reasonable,' he said.

'Let's go,' Marcel agreed. And we are going to leave quietly now, without the wisest person.

Eamетtri sighed with frustration. 'At least we will talk more privately.

-Then-



Six men in red joined the family looking at us with anxious expressions. I was very aware of Marcel's protective position in front of me- that is for sure what caused their alarm. I wanted to shout at them to run away. Marcel's teeth came together audibly. No, that is not it.

Fredric smiles- some.

'Enough already.'

The voice was high, Roseau, and n came from behind us.

Part: 3

Unbreakable

Looked at, I looked under... Marcel's other arm to see a small dark shape coming towards us. The edges of the beak, I knew it would be another one of them.

Who else?

At first, I thought it was a young boy. The newcomer was as small as Olivia, with lank, pale brown hair cut short. The body under the mantle- which was darker, almost black- was thin, and androgynous. All the same and everything, the face was too pretty for a boy. The face with wide eyes and full lips would make a Botticelli angel look like a gargoyle.

Even considering dull purple irises.

His size was so insignificant that the reaction to his appearance confused me. Fredric and Eametri immediately relaxed, retreating from their offensive positions to blend into the shadow of the overhanging walls.

Marcel abandoned and relaxed his position so all the same and all, in defeat.

'Jane,' he sighed with gratitude and resignation.

Olivia folded her arms over her chest, her expression was impassive.

'Follow me,' said Jane, her childish voice monotonous. She turned her back on us and silently drifted into the darkness.

Fredric made a gesture to get us there first, smiling.

Olivia walked after little Jane at once. Marcel wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me next to her. The aisle tilted slightly downwards as it narrowed. I looked at him with frantic questions in his eyes, all the same, and everything, he just shook his head. Although I could not hear the others behind us, I was sure they were there.

'Well, Olivia, Marcel said conversationally that we were walking.' I guess I should not be surprised to see you here.

'That was my mistake,' replied Olivia in the same tone. 'It was my job to set the record straight.'

'What happened?' His voice was polite as if he were barely interested. I imagined it was because of the listening ears behind us.

'It's a long story.' Olivia's eyes wavered towards me and away. 'In short, she jumped off a cliff, however, and not everyone was trying to commit suicide.'

Bell is all about extreme sports these days.

I flushed and turned my eyes straight ahead, facing the dark shadow that I could no longer see. I could imagine what he meant in Olivia's thoughts now. Near drownings, stalking angels, werewolves' friends...

'Uh,' said Marcel, with curvature, 'and the relaxed tone of his voice was gone.'

There was a loose curve at the alley, always tilted down, so I did not see the dead-end square coming until we reached the flat, windowless, brick face. Little Jane was intromitted.

Olivia did not hesitate, did not break the rhythm as she walked towards the wall. Then, with easy grace, she crept into a gaping hole in the street.

It looked like a drain, sunk into the lowest point of paving. I had not noticed it until Olivia disappeared, though, and all that, the big one was halfway there. The hole was small and black.

I hesitated.

'Everything is fine, Bell,' said Marcel in a deep voice. Olivia's going to catch you.

I peeked at the dodgy hole. I imagine he would have gone first, if Eamетtri and Fredric had not waited, smug and silent, behind us.

I crouched down, swinging my legs in the narrow gap.

'Olivia? I whispered, my voice trembling.

'I'm here, Bell,' she reassured me. His voice came from below to make me feel better.

Marcel took my wrists- his hands felt like stones in winter- and lowered me into the darkness.

'Ready?' He asked.

'Let her go,' Olivia called.

I closed my eyes, so I could not see the darkness, scribbling them together in terror, squeezing my mouth shut so as not to scream.

Marcel let me down.

It was quiet and short. The air whipped me for half a second, and then, with a silencer, while I was exhaling, Olivia's arms grabbed me.

I was going to have bruises; his arms were extremely hard. She held me up straight.

He was weak, however, and all, not black at the bottom. The light from the hole above provided a faint glow, reflecting damply from the stones under my feet. The light disappeared for a second, and then Marcel was a slight white glow beside me. He put his arm around me, holding me close to his side, and began to tow me quickly forward.

I wrapped both arms around his cold waist and tripped and tripped my way across the uneven stone surface. The sound of the heavy grid sliding over the drain hole behind us sounded with a metal purpose.

The dark street fire was quickly lost in the dark. The sound of my amazing footsteps resonated through the black space; it sounded very wide, all the same, and all I could not be sure of. There were no sounds other than my frantic heartbeat and my feet on the wet stones, except for once when an impatient sigh murmured from behind me.

Marcel held me firmly. He reached his free hand through his body to hold my face, too, his smooth thumb tracing on my lips. Occasionally, I could feel his face in my hair. I realized it was the only meeting we would have, and I thought I would be closer to him.

For now, I felt like he wanted me, and that was enough to catch up with the horror of the underground tunnel and the prowling angels behind us. It was nothing more than guilt, the same guilt that forced him to come here to die when he thought it was his fault that I had committed suicide. All the same and all, his lips press silently against my forehead, and I did not care what the motivation was. At least I could be with him before I die.

It was better than a long life.

I wish I had asked him exactly what was going to happen now. I desperately wanted to know how we were going to die as if it was going to somehow improve it, knowing in advance. All the same and all, I could not speak, even in a whisper, surrounded as we were. The others could hear everything- my every breath, my heart rate.

The path under our feet continued to tilt downwards, taking us deeper into the ground, and it made me claustrophobic. Only Marcel's hand, soothing against my face, prevented me from shouting.

I could not tell where the light came from, however, and all of that slowly became dark gray instead of black.

We were in a low, arched tunnel. Long trails of ebony moisture were not on the grey stones as if they were bleeding in ink.

I was shaking, and I thought it was out of fear. It was not until my teeth started chatting together that I realized I was cold. My clothes were still wet, and the temperature under the city was wintery. Just like Marcel's skin.

He realized it at the same time as me, and let me go, keeping only my hand.

'N-n-no,' I chatted, 'I threw my arms around him.' I do not care if I froze.

Who knew how much time we had left?

His cold hand crumples against my arm, trying to warm me up with friction.

We rushed into the tunnel, or it was like hurrying for me. My slow progress irritated someone- I guessed Fredric- and I could hear him sigh from time to time.

At the end of the tunnel was a grate- the iron bar rusts, all the same, and everything, thicker than my arm. A small door made of thinner, intertwined bars was open. Marcel sneaked through and rushed to a larger, brighter stone room. The grille slammed closed with a clang, followed by the slamming of a lock. I was too scared to look behind me.

On the other side of the long room was a low and heavy wooden door. It was very thick, as I could say because it was so open.

We walked through the door, and I looked around with surprise, relaxing automatically. Next to me, Marcel stretched out, his jaw clenched.

VERDICT WE WERE IN A BRIGHT AND MUNDANE CORRIDOR. The walls were white, the floor lined with industrial grey. The common rectangular fluorescent lamps were spaced evenly with the ceiling. It was warmer here, for which I was grateful.

This room seemed very benign after the gloom of the macabre stone sewers.

Marcel did not seem to agree with my assessment. He shone darkly down the long corridor, towards the little, black-wrapped figure at the end, standing by an elevator.

He shot me, and Olivia walked on my other side. The heavy door creaked behind us, and then there was the thud of a bolt sliding home.

Jane waited by the elevator, a hand holding the doors open for us. His expression was apathetic.

Once inside the elevator, the three angels who belonged to the ministry relaxed further. They pushed back their coats, dropping the hoods back on their shoulders. Fredric and Eametri were both slightly olive-skinned- he looked weird combined with their chalky pallor. Fredric's black hair was short, however, and all, Eametri waved on his shoulders. Their irises were purple deep around the edges, darkening until they were black around the pupil. Underneath the shrouds, their clothes were modern, pale, and non-descriptive. I curled up in the corner, grinding Marcel's teeth. His hand is still rubbing against my arm. He never took his eyes off Jane.

The elevator ride was short; we went into what looked like a chic office reception area. The walls were paneled, the floors lined with a thick deep green. There were no windows, all the same, and all, large light paintings of the Tuscan countryside hung everywhere as replacements. Pale leather sofas were arranged in comfortable clusters, and the shiny tables held crystal vases full of brightly colored bouquets. The smell of flowers reminded me of a funeral home.

In the middle of the room was a high counter made of polished mahogany. I screamed in amazement at the woman behind her.

She was tall, with dark skin and green eyes. She would have been very pretty in any other company. Because she was as human as I was. I did not understand what this human woman was doing here, totally at ease, surrounded by freeloaders.

She smiled politely at the front desk. 'Hello, Jane,' she said. There was no surprise in her face as she watched Jane's company. Not Marcel, his bare chest that bursts faintly in the white lights, or even me, disheveled and relatively hideous.

Jane nodded. Gianna. She continued to a set of double doors at the back of the room, and we followed.

As Fredric walked past the office, he winked at Gianna, and she laughed.

On the other side of the wooden doors was another type of reception. The pale boy in a pearl grey suit could have been Jane's twin. His hair was darker, and his lips were not as full, all the same, and everything, he was just as beautiful. He showed up for us.

He smiled, reaching out.

Jane.

'Alec,' she replied, kissing the boy. They kissed their cheeks on both sides.

Then he looked at us.

'They send you for one and you come back with two... and a half, ' he noted, looking at me.

'Good job.'

She laughed- the sound shone with joy like the rust of a baby.



'Welcome, Marcel,' said Alec. You look in a better mood.

'Marginally,' Marcel accepted in a flat voice. I looked at Marcel's hard face and wondered how his mood could have been darker before.

Alec laughed and examined me as I clung to Marcel's side. 'And that is the cause of all the trouble?' he asked, skeptical.

Marcel did not smile; contemptuous expression. Then he froze.

'Dibs,' Fredric called by chance from behind.

Marcel turned around, a building rumbling deep in his chest. Fredric smiled- his hand was raised, palm up; he wrapped his fingers twice, inviting Marcel forward.

Olivia touched Marcel's arm.

'Patience,' she warns.

They exchanged a long look, and I wish I had heard what she was saying to him. I thought it had something to do with not attacking Fredric because Marcel took a deep breath and turned to Alec.

'Aron will be so happy to see you again,' Alec says as if nothing had happened.

'Let's not keep him waiting,' Jane suggested.

Marcel nodded once.

Alec and Jane, holding hands, paved the way for another large ornate hall- would there ever be an end?

They ignored the doors at the end of the hall doors, completely covered in gold, stopping halfway down the hallway, and sliding a piece of side paneling to expose a plain wooden door. It was not locked. Alec opened it for Jane.

I wanted to moan when Marcel pulled me to the other side of the door. It was the same old stone as the square, the alley, and the sewers. And it was still dark and cold.

Part: 4

Perfectly

The stone antechamber was not large. It quickly opened into a brighter and cavernous room, perfectly round like a huge castle turret... which was exactly what it was.

Two floors up, long window slits project thin rectangles of sunlight onto the stone floor below. There were no artificial lights. The only furniture in the room was several massive wooden chairs, such as thrones, which were spaced unevenly, rinsing with curved stone walls. In the very center of the circle, in a slight depression, was another drain. I wondered if they were using it as an exit, like the hole in the street.

The room was not empty. A handful of people were summoned in a relaxed conversation.

The murmur of low, smooth voices was a gentle hum in the air. As I looked, a pair of pale women in summer gowns stopped in a patch of light, and, like prisms, their skin through the light in the rainbow shone against the walls of the sister.

The exquisite faces all turned to our party as we entered the room. Most of the immortals were dressed in discreet trousers and shirts that did not fit into the streets below at all. Yet the man who spoke first wore one of the long

dresses. He was black and brushed against the floor. For a while, I thought his long black hair was the hood of his coat.

'Jane, my dear, you're back!' His voice was but a sweet sigh.

It drifted forward, and the movement flowed with such surreal grace that I gawked, my mouth hanging open. Even Olivia, whose every movement resembled dance, could not compare.

I was only more amazed as he floated closer, and I could see his face. It was not like the unusually attractive faces around him (for he was not approaching us alone; the whole group converged around him, some following, and some walking in front of him in the alert manner of the bodyguards.)

I could not decide if his face was beautiful or not. The features were perfect. All the same and all, he was as different from the angels next to him as they were from me. His skin was translucent white, like onion skin, and he looked just as delicate- he stood in shocking contrast to the long black hair that framed his face. I felt a strange and horrible urge to touch her cheek, to see if it was softer than Marcel's or Olivia's, or if it was powdery, like chalk. His eyes were red, the same as the others around him, all the same, and all, the color was darkened, the laity; I wondered if his vision was affected by the mist.

He slipped towards Jane, took her face in his papery hands, kissed her lightly on her full lips, and then floated back with a step.

'Yes, Master. Jane smiled; the expression made him look like an angelic child.' I brought him back alive, just like you wanted him to.

'Ah, Jane.' He smiles, too.

'You are such a comfort to me.'

He turned his misty eyes towards us, and the smile cleared- became ecstatic.

'And Olivia and Bell, too!'

'It's a nice surprise!'

'Wonderful!'

I had the look in shock as he called our names unofficially as if we were old friends falling for an unexpected visit.

He turned to our imposing escort. 'Fredric be a dear and talk to my brothers about our company. I am sure they will not want to miss that.

'Yes, Master.' Fredric nodded and disappeared as we came.

'See, Marcel?' The strange angel turned and smiled at Marcel like a tender All the same and everything, scolding Grandpa. 'What did I tell you? Aren't you glad you did not give you what you wanted yesterday?'

'Yes, Aron, I am,' he accepted, clutching his arm around my waist.

'I love a happy ending.' Aron sighed.

'They are so rare. All the same and everything, I want the whole story. How did this happen? Olivia? He turned to Olivia with curious and misty eyes.' Your brother thought you infallible, all the same, and all that there was a mistake.

'Oh, I am far from infallible. She flashed a dazzling smile. She looked perfectly at ease, except that her hands were hanging from small, clenched fists.' As you can see today, I cause problems as often as I cure them.

'You are too modest,' Aron said. 'I have seen some of your most amazing feats, and I must admit I have never looked at anything like your talent. Wonderful!'

Olivia wobbled on Marcel.

Aron did not miss it.

'I'm sorry, we weren't presented correctly at all, were we?' It is just that I feel like I know you already, and I tend to get ahead of myself. Your brother specially introduced us yesterday. You see, I share some of your brother's talent, but I am limited in a way that he is not.

'And also, exponentially, more powerful,' added Marcel dryly. He looked at Olivia as he quickly explained. 'Aron needs physical contact to hear your thoughts, all the same, and everything he hears much more than I do. You know I only hear what is going through your head right now. Aron hears all the thoughts your mind has ever had.'

Olivia raised her delicate eyebrows, and Marcel bowed his head.

Aron did not miss that either.

'All the same and everything, to be able to hear from afar... Aron sighed, gesticulating towards both, and the exchange that had just taken place.' It would be so convenient. Aron looked over our shoulders. All the other heads turned in the same direction, including Jane, Alec, and Eametri, who stood silently beside us.

I was the slowest to turn. Fredric was back, and behind him were two other men dressed in black robes. Both looked a lot like Aron, we even had the same black hair running down. The other had a shock of snow-white hair- the same shade as his face that grazed his shoulders. Their faces had identical thin paper skin.

The trio of Joh's painting was complete, unchanged by the last three hundred years since it was painted. 'Marcus, Karly, look! Aron crooned.' Karly is alive, and Olivia is here with her! Isn't that wonderful?

Neither of the other two looked wonderful, would be their first choice of words.

The black-haired man seemed completely annoyed by his snow-white hair covering half of his face, as he had seen too many millennia, of the enthusiasm of the Aron era.

Their lack of interest did not dampen Aron's pleasure.

Part: 5

Melodic

'Let's give history,' Aron almost sang in a feathery voice.

The old white-haired angel leaves, sliding towards one of the wooden thrones. The other stopped next to Aron, and he took out his hand, at first, I thought I would take Aron's hand. All the same and all, he just touched Aron's palm briefly, then dropped his hand at his side. Aron raised a black forehead. I was wondering how his papery skin did not crumple into the effort.

Marcel sniffed very quietly, and Olivia looked at him, curious.

'Thank you, Marcus,' said Aron. It is very interesting.

I realized, a second later, that Marcus was making his thoughts known to Aron.

Marcus did not seem interested. He moved away from Aron to join the one who must be Karly, sitting against the wall. Two of the angels' presents followed silently behind his bodyguards as I had thought before. I could see that the two women in sundown all the dresses had gone to stand alongside Karly in the same way. The idea of an angel in need of a guard was still a little ridiculous to me, and all of them, the elders, were as fragile as their skin suggested.

Aron was shaking his head. 'Unbelievable,' he says. It is unbelievable.

Olivia's expression was frustrated. Marcel turned to her and explained himself again in a low and quick voice. Marcus sees relationships. He is surprised by the intensity of ours.

Aron smiled. 'So practical,' he repeated. Then he talked to us. 'It takes a little to surprise Marcus; I can assure you that.

I looked at Marcus' dead face, and I believed it.

'It's so hard to understand, even now,' said Aron,

looking at Marcel's arm wrapped around me. It was hard for me to follow Aron's chaotic train of thought. I had a tough time keeping up. 'How can you stay so close to her like that?

'It's not effortless,' marcel replied calmly.

'All the same and all still killed his chanteuse!

What a waste!

Marcel laughed once without humor.

'I look at it more like a price.'

'Aron was skeptical.' An extremely high price.

'Opportunity cost.'

Aron laughed. 'If I had not felt it through your memories, I would not have thought that the call of someone's blood could be so strong. I have never felt anything like it myself. Most of us would trade a lot for such a gift, and yet you....-Waste it,' concludes Marcel, his sarcastic voice now.

Aron laughs again. 'Ah, how I miss my friend Joh! You remind me of him, but he was not so angry.

'Joh surpasses me in many other ways as well.'

'I certainly never thought of seeing Joh beaten for self-control of all things, all the same, and you're all ashamed of him.'

'Barely...' Marcel seemed impatient. As if he had had enough of foreplay. It scared me more; I could not help but imagine what he was waiting for.

'I'm happy with his success,' Aron mused. 'Your memories of him are quite a gift to me, but they amaze me exceedingly. I am surprised by how it is... I like his success in that unorthodox way he chose. I expected him to lose, weaken over time.'

I had mocked his plan to find other people who would share his vision. Yet, in a way, I am glad to be wrong.

Marcel did not answer me.

'All the same and all, your restraint!' Aron sighed. 'I did not know that such a force was possible. To ensure you are against such a siren call, not just once and everything, repeatedly, if I had not felt it myself, I would not have believed it.'



Marcel looked at Aron's admiration without expression. I knew that his face well in time had not changed that- to guess something bubbling beneath the surface. I fought to keep my breath, even. 'I just remember how she appealed to you...' Aron laughed. 'It makes me thirsty. Marcel tense.

'Don't be disturbed,' reassured Aron. 'I mean it doesn't hurt.' All the same and everything, I am so curious about one thing. He looked at me with keen interest. 'Mary, I?' he asked impatiently, raising his hand.

'Ask him,' marcel suggested in a flat voice.

'Of course, how rude of me!

Aron exclaimed. 'Bell,' he addressed me directly now. 'I am fascinated that you are the only exception to Marcel's impressive talent- so remarkably interesting that such a thing should happen! And I was wondering, since our talents are similar in many ways, if you would be so nice as to allow me to try to see if you are an exception to me, too?'

My eyes waved Marcel's face in terror. Despite Aron's politeness, I did not think I had a choice. I was horrified at the thought of allowing him to touch me, but also paradoxically intrigued by the chance to feel his strange skin.

Marcel nodded encouragingly if because he was sure that Aron would not hurt me, or because there was no choice, I could not say.

I turned to Aron and raised my hand slowly in front of me. He was shaking.

He slipped closer, and he meant that his expression was reassuring. All the same and all, his papery features were too strange, too foreign, and scary, to reassure. The look on his face was more confident than his words had been.

Aron reached out, as if to shake my hand, and pressed his insignificant-looking skin against mine. It was hard all the same and all felt fragile shale rather than granite and even colder than I expected.

His filmed eyes smiled at mine, and it was impossible to look away. They were mesmerizing strangely and unpleasantly.

Aron's face changed as I watched. Confidence wavered and became doubtful at first, then incredulous before he calmed it down in a friendly mask.

'It's very interesting,' he said, freeing my hand and backing away.

My eyes wavered towards Marcel, and although his face was composed, I thought it seemed a little smug.

Aron continued to drift with a thoughtful expression. He was quiet for a while, his eyes flickering between the three of us.

Then, suddenly, he shook his head.

'A first,' he said to himself, 'I wonder if she is immune to our other talents.' Jane, my dear?

'No!' Marcel growled the word. Olivia grabs her arm with a restrained hand. He shook her.

Little Jane smiles happily at Aron.

'Yes, Master?'

Marcel was surely now, the heartbreaking and heartbreaking sound of him, glaring at Aron with eyes full of bullets. The room was still gone, everyone looking at him in amazement as if he were committing an embarrassing social faux pas. I saw Fredric smile; I hope and take a step forward.

Aron looked at him once, and he froze in place, his smile turning into a sulky expression.

Then he talked to Jane. 'I wondered, my dear, if Karly is safe from you.'

I could hardly hear Aron on Marcel's furious growls. He let me down, moving to hide from their point of view. Karly ghostly in our direction, with his entourage, to watch.

Jane turned to us with a beatific smile.

'Don't do it!' Olivia cried while Marcel was over-the-top of the little girl.

Before I could react, before anyone could jump between them, before Aron's bodyguards could get tense, Marcel was on the ground.

No one had touched him, all the same, and everything, he was on the stone floor writhing in obvious agony, while I watched in horror.

Jane was only smiling at her now, and everything clicked together.

What Olivia had said about great gifts, why everyone treated Jane with such deference, and why- Marcel had thrown himself in her way before she could do that to me.

Part: 6

Ringing

'Stop! I screamed, my voice echoing in the silence, jumping forward to put myself between them. Yet Olivia threw her arms around me in an unbreakable grip and ignored my struggles. There was no noise on Marcel's lips as he shouted

against the stones. I felt like my head would explode because of the pain of looking at it.

'Jane,' Aron recalls in a calm voice. She looked up quickly, smiling again with pleasure, interrogative eyes. As soon as Jane looked away, Marcel was still.

Aron bowed his head towards me.

Jane turned her smile in my direction.

I did not even see his look. I watched Marcel from Olivia's prison, still in unnecessary trouble.

'He's fine,' Olivia whispered in a tight voice. As she spoke, he sat down, then leaped slightly to his feet. His eyes met mine, and they were struck with horror. At first, I thought the horror was for what he had just suffered. All the same and all, then he quickly looked at Jane, and back to me and her face relaxed in relief.

I looked at Jane too, and she was not smiling anymore. She looked at me; his jaw clenched with the intensity of his concentration. I backed off, waiting for the pain.

Nothing happened.

Marcel was by my side. He touched Olivia's arm, and she gave me back to him.

Aron made fun of me. Hey. ha,' he said, laughing. 'It is wonderful!

Jane with frustration, leaning forward as if she were getting ready for spring.

'Don't be deported, my dear, Aron said in a comforting tone, placing a powdery hand on his shoulder.'

'It confuses us all.'

Jane's upper lip curled up on her teeth as she continued to dazzle over me.

« Ha, ha, ha, Aron chortled nouveau.

'You are very brave, Marcel, to endure in silence. I asked Jane to do this to me once out of curiosity. He shook his head in admiration.'

Marcel looked disgusted.

'So, what are we doing with you now?' Aron sighed.

Marcel and Olivia stiffen up. That was the part they were waiting for. I started shaking.

'I don't suppose there's a chance that you've changed your mind?' Aron asked Marcel, I hope. 'Your talent would be a great addition to our small business.'

Marcel hesitated. From the corner of my eye, I saw Fredric and Jane wince.

Marcel weighed every word before he said it. 'I would be... rather... step. Aron asked, always hopeful. 'Perhaps you would be interested in joining us?'

'No, thank you,' says Olivia.

'What about you, Bell?' Aron raised his eyebrows.

Marcel hugs, in my ears. I looked at empty Aron. Was he joking? Or did he ask me if I wanted to stay for dinner?

It was Karly white-haired who broke the silence.

'What?' he demanded of Aron, and his voice, but no more than a whisper, was flat.

'Karly, you surely see the potential,' said Aron affectionately. 'I have not seen such a promising potential talent

since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us? Karly looked at him with a caustic expression. Jane's eyes shone with indignation at the comparison.

Marcel smoked next to me. I heard a rumble in his chest, building towards a grunt.

I could not let his temperament hurt him.

'No, thank you,' I said with a little more than a whisper, my voice breaking with dread.

Aron sighed. 'It is unfortunate. This mess.

Marcel has tightened up. 'Join or die, don't you? I suspected it when we were brought into this room. So much for your laws.

The tone of his voice surprised me. He looked furious, all the same, and all this, there was something deliberate in his delivery as if he had chosen his words with great care.

'Of course not.' We were already summoned here, Marcel, waiting for Heidi to return. Not for you.

'Aron,' said Karly. 'The law requires them.

Marcel looked at Karly. 'How do you do it?' He must have known what Karly was thinking, however, and all he seemed determined to make him speak aloud.

Karly pointed the finger at me. 'She knows too much. You have laid out our secrets. His voice was papery thin, as was his skin.

'There are a few humans in your masquerade here too, Marcel reminded him, and I thought of the pretty receptionist below.'

Karly's face twisted into a new expression. Was that supposed to be a smile? 'Yes,' he agreed. 'All the same and everything, when they are no longer useful to us, will be used to support us. This is not your plan for this one. If she betrays our secrets, are you ready to destroy her? I do not think so,' he laughs.

'I wouldn't,' I began, whispering again.

Karly silenced me with an icy look.

'You also have no intention of making her one of us,' continued Karly.

'Therefore, it is a vulnerability. Although it is true, for this, only his life is lost. You can leave if you want.'

Marcel broke his teeth.

'That's what I thought,' says Karly, 'with something akin to pleasure. Fredric thought forward, impatient.'

'Unless... Aron interrupted. He seemed dissatisfied with how the conversation had gone.' 'Unless you intend to give him immortality?'

Marcel sang his lips, hesitating for a moment before answering. 'What if I do?'

Aron smiled, happy again.

'Why?' Then you would be free to go home and give my greetings to my friend Joh.

'All the same and all, I am afraid you will have to say it.

Aron raised his hand in front of him.

Karly, who had begun to scowl furiously, relaxed.

Marcel's lips tightened in a fierce line. He looked me in the eye, and I looked back.

'I think so,' he murmured.

Please.

Was that a disgusting idea? Would he rather die than change me? I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach.

Marcel looked at me with a tortured expression.

And then Olivia walked away from us, ahead towards Aron. We turned around to watch her. Her hand was raised like the sister's.

She said nothing, and Aron waved to her anxious guards as they moved to block her approach. Aron met her halfway and took her hand with an avid and acquisitive glow in her eyes.

He bent his head over their touching hands, his eyes closing as he concentrated.

Olivia was motionless, her face empty. I heard Marcel's teeth break together.

No one moved... Aron seems frozen in Olivia's hand. Seconds passed, and I became increasingly stressed, wondering how long it would take before it was too long. Before that meant that something was not worse than it already was.

Another agonizing moment passed, and then Aron's voice broke the silence.

'Ha, ha, ha,' he said, laughing, his head still leaning forward. He looked up slowly, his eyes shining with excitement. 'It was fascinating!

Olivia smiles dryly. 'I am glad you enjoyed it.



'To see things, you've seen especially those that haven't arrived yet!' He shook his head in wonder.

'All the same and all that it will do,' she reminded him, her voice calm.

'Yes, yes, it's pretty determined.' There is certainly no problem.

Karly looked bitterly disappointed- a feeling he seemed to share with Fredric and Jane.

'Aron,' Karly complained.

'Dear Karly,' smiled Aron. Do not worry. Think about the possibilities! They do not join us today, however, and we can all still hope for the future.

Imagine the joy of young people

Olivia alone would take us to our little house... Besides, I am so curious to see how

'Karly turns out!'

Aron seemed convinced. Didn't he realize how subjective Olivia's visions were? That she might decide to transform me today and change it tomorrow? A million small decisions, his decisions, and so many others, to Marcel- could change his path, and with that, the future.

And is it important that Olivia is ready, would it make a difference if I became an angel when the idea was so disgusting for Marcel? If death was, for him, a better alternative than having me in time, immortal boredom? Terrified as I was, I felt myself sinking into depression, drowning in it...

'So, we're free to go now?' Marcel asked with one voice.

'Yes, yes,' said Aron pleasantly. All the same and all, please visit again. It was exciting!

'And we visit you too,' Karly said, her eyes suddenly half closed like the heavy gaze of a lizard. 'To make sure you follow through on your side.

Where I, you, I would not delay too long. We are not offering a second chance.

Marcel's jaw tightened tight, all the same, and all he nodded once.

Karly smiled and returned to the place where Mark was still sitting, impassive and indifferent. Fredric groans.

'Ah, Fredric.' Aron smiled, amused.

Heidi will be always there. patience.

Marcel's voice had a new advantage. 'In that case, we should leave as soon as possible.

'Yes,' agreed Aron. 'It is a clever idea. Accidents happen. Please wait below until after dark, however, if you do not mind.

'Of course,' agreed Marcel, moaning at the thought of waiting for the day before our escape.

'And here,' added Aron, adding so much to Fredric with a finger. Fredric immediately advances, and Aron detaches the gray coat worn by the enormous angel, pulling from his shoulders. He gave it to Marcel. 'Take this.' You are a little visible.

Marcel put on the long coat, leaving the hood down.

Aron sighed. 'It suits you.'

Marcel laughed, though, and everything broke abruptly, looking over his shoulder. Thank you, Aron. We will wait below.

Part: 7

Ta-ta-ta

'Goodbye, young friends,' said Aron, his eyes shining, looking in the same direction. 'Let's go,' said Marcel, urgent now.

Eametri gesture that we should follow, then define how we would have come, the only exit by the look of things.

Marcel quickly pulled me next to him. Olivia was close to my other side, with a hard face.

'Not fast enough,' she murmured a little.

I looked at her, scared, all the same, and everything, she seemed only distressed. It was then that I heard for the first time the babbling of loud and rough voices coming from the antechamber.

'Well, that's unusual,' said the hoarse voice of a burgeoning man.

'Then, medieval,' an unpleasantly shrill female voice gush back.

A large crowd walked through the small door, filling the smallest stone room. Eametri asked us to make room. We pressed against the cold wall to let them pass.

The couple opposite, the Americans ringing with them, looked around them with eyes of appreciation.

'Welcome, guests! Welcome to Volterra! I could hear Aron singing the big turret.

The others, forty or more, fell after the couple. Some have studied the setting as tourists. Some photos even broke. Others looked confused as if the story that brought them into this room no longer made sense. I noticed a little dark woman. around her neck was a rosary, and she grasped the cross firmly in one hand. She walked slower than the others, touching someone from time to time and asking a question in an unknown language.

No one understood her, and her voice became more panicked.

Marcel pulled my face against my chest, all the same, and all that was too late. I've already figured it out.

As soon as the smallest pause appeared, Marcel pushed me quickly towards the door. I could feel the horrified expression on my face, and the tears began to gather in my eyes.

The ornate gilded hallway was quiet, empty except for a beautiful sculptural woman. She looked at us curiously, me in particular.

'Welcome home, Heidi,' welcomed her from behind us.

Heidi smiles in absentia. She reminded me of Rose, although they don't look alike- it was just that her beauty, too, was exceptional, unforgettable. I couldn't look that far.

She was dressed to emphasize this beauty. His surprisingly long legs, darkened with tights, were exposed by the shortest miniskirts. Its top was long-sleeved and high-necked, all the same, and all that, extremely fitted and built of red vinyl. Her long mahogany hair was shiny, and her eyes were the strangest shade of purple- a color that could result from blue-tinted contacts on red irises.

'Eametri,' she replied in a silky voice, her eyes flickering between my face and Marcel's grey coat.

'Beautiful peach,' Eametri complimented, and I suddenly understood the eye-catching outfit she was wearing... She was not only the fisher the same and all, but also the bait.

Part: 8

Exploded

Thank you. She flashed a beautiful smile.

'Don't you come?'

'In a minute.' Keep it to myself.

Heidi nodded and sneaked through the door with one last curious look at me.

Marcel gave me a rhythm that made me run to follow. Nevertheless, we still could not pass through the ornate door at the end of the corridor before the screams began.

VOL- EAMETTRI WE IN THE ZONE OF RECEPTION JOYEUSEMENT OPULENCE, where the Gianna woman was still at her post behind the polite counter. Bright and harmless music tinged with hidden speakers.

'Don't leave until nightfall,' he warned us.

Marcel nodded, and Eametri rushed away.

Gianna did not seem at all surprised by the exchange, although she looked at Marcel's borrowed mantle with astute speculation.

'Are you okay?' Marcel asked under his breath, too weak for the human woman to hear. His voice was rough-

though velvet may be rough- with anxiety. Always stressed by our situation, I imagined.

'You better have her sit down before she falls,' Olivia says. 'It's going to pieces.'

It was only then that I realized that I was shaking, shaking hard, that my whole frame was vibrating until my teeth were chatting and the room around me seemed to wobble and blur in my eyes. For a second, I wondered if this was how Marcel felt just before he exploded into a werewolf.

I heard a sound that didn't make sense, a strange, heartbreaking counterpart to the otherwise joyful background music. Distracted by the shaking, I couldn't tell where it came from.

'Sh-h, Bell, sh-h,' said Marcel, pulling me towards the sofa furthest from the curious man in the office.

'I think she's hysterical. You should slap her,' Olivia suggested.

Marcel looked at her frantically.

Then I understood. oh. The noise was me. The heartbreaking noise was the sobs coming from my chest. That's what was shaking me. 'Everything is fine, you're safe, everything's fine,' he says repeatedly. He pulled me on his lap and hid the thick wool coat around me, protecting me from his cold skin.

I knew it was stupid to react like that. Who knew how long I had to watch his race? He was saved, and I was saved, and he was able to leave me as soon as we were free. Having my eyes so full of tears that I couldn't see his features was a useless folly.

Nevertheless, behind my eyes where tears could not wash the picture, I could still see the panicked face of the little woman with the rosary.

'All these people,' he sobs.

'I know,' he murmured.

'It's so horrible.'

'Yes, it is. I wish you hadn't had to see that.'

I rested my head against his cold chest, using the thick coat to wipe my eyes. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down.

'Is there anything I can get you? It was Gianna, leaning over Marcel's shoulder with a look that was both concerned and yet still professional and detached at the same time. He does not seem to bother her that her face was inches away from a hostile angel. She was either totally unconscious or particularly good at her job.'

'No,' replied Marcel coldly.

She nodded, smiled at me, and then disappeared.

I waited until he was out of range. 'Does she know what's going on here? I demanded, my voice low and hoarse. I was controlling myself, my breathing tight.

'Yes, she knows everything,' said Marcel. 'Does she know they're ever going to kill her? 'She knows it's a possibility,' he says.

It surprised me.

Marcel's face was hard to read. She hopes they will decide to keep her.

I felt the blood leave my face.

'She wants to be one of them?'

He nodded once, his eyes fixed on my face, looking at my reaction.

I shivered. 'How can she want that?' I whispered, more to myself than really looking for an answer. 'How can she watch these people fall through this hideous room and want to be a part of that? Marcel did not respond. His expression twisted in response to something I had said.'

Looking at his two beautiful faces, trying to understand the change, he suddenly struck me that I was here, in Marcel's arms, however fleeting it may be, and that we were not at that very moment about to be killed.

'Oh, Marcel, I cried, and I sobbed again. It was a stupid reaction. The tears were too thick for me to return to his face, and it was inexcusable. I only had until sunset, that's for sure. Like a fairy tale again, with delays that put an end to the magic.'

'What's wrong?' he asked, still anxious, rubbing my back with gentle pats.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. What was the worst he could do? Push me and hug me closer to him. 'Is it sick for me to be happy right now? I asked. My voice broke twice.

He didn't push me. He squeezed me against his icy chest, so tight that it was difficult to breathe, even with my lungs firmly intact. 'I know exactly what you mean,' he murmured. 'All the same and all, we have a lot of reasons to be happy. On the one hand, we're alive.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'It's a good one.'



'And together,' he breathed. His breath was so soft that he made my head swim.

I nodded, of course, he didn't put the same weight on that consideration as I did.

'And I hope we'll still be alive tomorrow.' I hope, I say uncomfortable.

'The outlook is pretty good,' Olivia assured me. She had been so calm; I almost forgot he was here.

'I'm going to see Ray in less than twenty-four hours,' she says in a satisfied tone.

Olivia Lucky. She could trust her future.

I couldn't keep my eyes open on Marcel's face for long. I looked at him, wishing more than anything that the future would never come. That this moment would last forever, or, if it were not, that I would cease to exist when it did.

Marcel looked me straight in the eye, his eyes soft black, and it was easy to pretend that he felt the same way. That is what I did. I semblant.de to make the moment sweeter.

His fingers traced the circles before my eyes. 'You look so tired.

'And you're thirsty,' he murmured, studying the purple bruises under his black irises.

He shrugged. 'It's nothing.'

'Are you sure?' I could sit down with Olivia, I said, unwilling; I'd rather kill myself now than move an inch from where I was.

'Don't be ridiculous.' He sighed; his gentle breath caressed my face. 'I've never been in better control of this side of my nature than I have now.'

I had a million questions for him. One of them is bubbling on my lips now, all the same, and everything, I held my tongue. I didn't want to spoil the moment, however imperfect, here in this room that made me sick, under the eyes of the monster.

Here, in his arms, it was so easy to fantasize that he wanted me. I didn't want to think about his motives now to find out if he acted that way to keep me calm while we were still in danger, or if he felt guilty about where we were and relieved that he wasn't responsible for my death. The interval time had been enough for me not to disturb him now. All the same and all that, it didn't matter. I was so much happier pretending.

I was silent in his arms, I recorded his face, I pretended...

He looked at my face as if he were doing the same thing, while he and

Olivia discussed how to get home.

Their voices were so fast and low that I knew Gianna couldn't understand. I missed half of it myself. However, it seemed that there would be more flights. I was wondering if the yellow Porsche had gone back to its owner.

'What is everything about singers?'

Olivia asked at one point. 'La Tua Cantante,' says Marcel. His voice turned words into music.

'Yes, that,' said Olivia, 'and I concentrated for a moment.' I had questioned that, too, at the time.

I felt Marcel shrug his shoulders around me. 'They have a name for someone who feels the way

Karly does it to me. She is called my singer because her blood sings for me.

Olivia...

I was tired enough to sleep, however, and all, I fought against weariness. I wasn't going to miss a second of the time I spent with him. Occasionally, talking to Olivia, he would suddenly lean over and kiss me- his smooth glass lips brushing against my hair, my forehead, the tip of my nose. Each time it was like an electric shock to my long sleepy heart. The sound of his blows filled the whole room.

It was the slap of heaven in the middle of hell.

I've completely lost track of time. So, when Marcel's arms clenched around me, and he and Olivia looked at the back of the room with suspicious eyes, I panicked. I cringe into Marcel's chest as Alec-his eyes now a bright ruby, all the same, and all, still immaculate in his light gray suit, despite the afternoon meal walking through the double doors.

That was good news.

'You're free to leave now,' Alec told us, his tone so warm that you'd think we were all friends for a lifetime. 'We ask you not to linger in the city.

Marcel did not respond to the present; his voice was icy.

'It will not be a problem.

Alec smiled, nodded, and disappeared again.

'Follow the right lane around the corner until the first set of elevators,' Gianna told us as Marcel helped me get up. 'The lobby is two stories down and off the street. Goodbye, now,' she added pleasantly. I was wondering if her skills would be enough to save her.

Olivia shot him with a dark look.

I was relieved that there was another exit; I did not know if I could handle another tour through the subway.

We left by a luxurious lobby with taste. I was the only one looking back at the medieval castle that housed the elaborate business façade. I could not see the turret from here, which I was grateful for.

The party was still booming in the streets. The streetlights were just coming on as we walked quickly through the narrow, cobbled streets. The sky was dull gray, discoloration above, all the same, and all the buildings piled up in the streets so tightly that it felt darker.

The party was darker, too.

Marcel's long coat does not dingle as he could have done on a normal evening in Volterra. There were others in black satin coats now, and the plastic fangs I had seen on the child in the square today seemed to be extremely popular with adults. 'Ridiculous,' Marcel whispered once.

I did not notice when Olivia disappeared next to me. I tried to ask her a question, and she was gone.

'Where's Olivia?' I whispered in panic.

She went to get your luggage from where she hid it this morning.

I had forgotten that I had access to a toothbrush. It has brightened my outlook.

'She's stealing a car, too, isn't she? I guessed it.

He smiles. Not until we are out.

It looked like an exceptionally long way to the entrance. Marcel could see that I had passed; he injured his arm around my waist and supported most of my weight as we walked.

I shuddered as he pulled me through the dark stone archway. The huge ancient portcullis above was like a cage door, threatening to fall on us, to lock ourselves in.

Part: 9

Detective

He drove me to a dark car, waiting in a shadow pool to the right of the door with the engine running. To my surprise, he slipped in the back seat with me, instead of insisting on driving.

Olivia apologized. 'I am sorry. She gestured vaguely towards the dashboard.

'There was not much to choose from. 'That's fine,

Olivia. He smiles. 'Not all of them can be 911 Turbos. She sighed. 'I might have to acquire one of these legally. It was fabulous.

'I'm going to get you one for Christmas,' Marcel promised.

Olivia turned to him, which worried me, for she was already accelerating down the dark, winding hill at the same time.

'Yellow,' she told him.

Marcel kept me in his embrace. Inside the grey coat, I was warm and comfortable.

More than comfortable.

'You can sleep now, Bell,' he murmured. It is over.

I knew he meant danger, the nightmare in the old town, all the same, and all that, I had to swallow hard again before I could answer.

'I do not want to sleep. I am not tired. Just the second part was a lie. I was not about to close my eyes. The car was only dimly lit by the dashboard controls, all the same, and all I had to do was see his face.

He squeezed his hollow lips under my ear. 'Try,' he encouraged.

I shook my head.

He sighed. 'You're always so stubborn.

I was stubborn; I fought with my heavy lids, and I won.

The dark road was the hardest part; the bright lights of Florence airport made things easier, as did the chance to brush my teeth and change into clean clothes; Olivia bought Marcel new clothes, too, and he left the dark coat on a pile of garbage in an alley.

The plane trip to Rome was so short that there was no chance for fatigue to drag me under. I knew that flying from Rome to Atlanta would be another matter entirely, so I asked the air host if she could bring me a Coke.

'Bell,' said Marcel in disapproval. He knew my low tolerance to caffeine.

Olivia was behind us. I could hear him whispering to Ray on the phone.

'I don't want to sleep,' I reminded him. I gave him a credible excuse because it was true. 'If I close my eyes now, I am going to see things I do not want to see. I am going to have nightmares.

He did not argue with me after that.

It would have been a particularly enjoyable time to talk, to get the answers- I needed- all the same and everything, not wanted; I was already desperate for what I could hear. We had an uninterrupted block of tires in front of us, and he could not escape me into a well plane, not easily, at least. No one would hear us except Olivia; it was late, and most passengers turned off the lights and asked for pillows with deaf voices. The conversation would help me fight exhaustion.

All the same and all, paradoxically, I bit my tongue against the flood of questions. My reasoning was tainted by exhaustion, all the same, and all, I hoped that by postponing the discussion, I could buy a few more hours with him a few moments later in this for another night, Scheherazade style.

Part: 10

Self-entertainment

My sis upskirt and masturbate video and pic are all about me.

So, I continued to drink soda and even resisted the urge to blink. Marcel seemed perfectly happy to hold me in his arms, his fingers tracing my face repeatedly. I touched his face too. I could not stop, even though I was afraid it would hurt me later when I was alone again. He continued to kiss my hair, my forehead, my wrists... All the same and everything, never my

lips, and it was good. How many ways can a heart be mutilated, and can it still be expected to continue beating? I had been through a lot of things that should have ended me in the last few days, though, and it did not make me feel strong.

Instead, I felt fragile, as if a word could break me.

Marcel did not speak. He was hoping I would sleep.

He had nothing to say.

I won the fight against my heavy lids. I was awake when we arrived at the Indiana airport, and I even watched the sun start to rise on the Alleghenies cloud cover before marcelling slid through the closed window. I was proud of myself. I hadn't missed a minute.

Neither Olivia nor Marcel was surprised by the reception waiting for us at Sea-Tac airport, all the same, and it all caught me off guard. Ray was the first I saw; he didn't seem to see me at all. Her eyes were only for Olivia. She quickly went to her side; they did not kiss like other couples who met there. They only looked at each other, but somehow the moment was so firm that I still felt the need to lift the air.

Joh and Isla waited in a quiet corner away from the line for metal detectors, in the shadow of a large pillar. Isla reached me, hugging me fiercely, but clumsily because Marcel kept his arms around me too.

'Thank you very much,' she said to my ear.

Then she threw her arms around Marcel, and she seemed to cry if possible.

'You'll never make me go through this again,' she almost growled.

Marcel smiled, repenting.



Sorry, Mommy.

'Thank you, Bell,' said Joh. We owe you.

'No sooner did I mumble. The sleepless night was suddenly overwhelming. My head felt disconnected from my body.

'She died standing,' Marcel scolds. 'Let's take her home.

I do not know if the house was what I wanted at this point, I fell, half blind, through the airport, Marcel dragging me to one side and Isla on the other. I didn't know if Olivia and Ray were behind us or not, and I was too exhausted to watch.

I think I slept most of the time, even though I was still walking when we reached their car. The surprise of seeing Emmah and Rose leaning against the black sedan under the dim lights of the car park gave me a new lease of life. Marcel stiffens.

'Don't do that,' whispered Isla. 'She feels terrible.

'She shouldn't try,' Marcel says, 'to lower her voice.

'It is not his fault,' I said, 'my words are full of exhaustion.'

'Let him change,' begged Isla. We'll ride with Olivia and Ray. Marcel shines brightly on the blond angel of absurd beauty that awaits us.

'Please, Marcel,' I said. I did not want to ride with Rose, nor did it seem, however, and all this had caused more than enough discord in his family.

He sighed and pushed me back to the car.

Emmah and Ross got in the front seat without talking, while Marcel shot me again in the back. I knew I was no longer

going to be able to fight my eyelids, and I put my head against his chest in defeat, letting them close. I felt the car purring at life.

'Marcel,' Ross began.

'I know. Marcel's sudden tone was not generous.'

'Liv? Ross asked softly.'

My eyelids floated in shock and excitement. It was the first time she spoke to me directly.

'Yes, Rose?' I asked, hesitantly.

'I'm incredibly sorry, Liv. I feel unhappy about every part of it and so grateful that you dared to go and save my brother after what I did. Please say you're going to exonerate me.

The words were clumsy and strange, stilted because of his embarrassment, all the same, and everything, they seemed sincere.

'Of course, Ross,' I stammered, seizing at any chance of making her hate me a little less. It's not your fault at all. I'm the one who jumped off the cliff. Of course, I forgive you.

The words came out like porridge.

'It doesn't matter until she's conscious, Rose,' Emmah says with a laugh.

'I am conscious,' I said. It sounded like a scrambled sigh.

'Let her sleep,' insisted Marcel, 'all the same, and everyone, her voice was a little warmer.

Marcel set me up. I could recognize that I was straight, all the same, and everything, I could not feel my legs. I walked

forward anyway until the sidewalk swirled towards my face.  
Marcel's arms caught me before I hit the pavement.

And then I heard Jack.

« Bell! »

'Jack, I mumbled, trying to shake the stupor.

'Sh-h,' whispered Marcel. 'It's good; you are at home  
and safe. All you must do is sleep.

'I can't believe you have the courage to show your face  
here. Jack rang Marcel; his voice much closer now.

'Stop, Dad,' I moaned. He did not hear me.

'What's wrong with her? Jack demanded.

'She's just very tired, Jack, Marcel assures her quietly.

'Please let her rest.

'Don't tell me what to do! Jack screamed.

'Give it to me. Get your hands out of her!

Marcel tried to pass me to Jack, all the same, and all  
that, I clung to him with locked, tenacious fingers. I could feel  
my father pulling me on the arm.

'Stop, Dad,' I said, with more volume. I managed to drag  
my eyelids to look at Jack with bleary eyes. 'Be angry with me.

We were in front of my house. The front door was  
open. The above cloud cover was too thick to be guessed at one  
o'clock in the day.

'You bet I will be,' Jack promised. Go. Kay. Let me down,  
I sighed.

Marcel set me up. I could see that I was straight, all the same, and all that, I could not feel my legs. I walked forward anyway until the sidewalk swirled towards my face. Marcel's arms caught me before I hit the concrete.

'Let me lift it,' said Marcel. Then I'm going to leave.

'No,' they cried in panic. I didn't have my answers yet. He must have stayed at least that long, didn't he?

'I won't be far away,' marcel promised, whispering so low in my ear that Jack had no hope of hearing.

I didn't hear Jack answer, all the same, and all, Marcel entered the house. My open eyes only went up the stairs. The last thing I felt was that Marcel's fresh hands detached his fingers from his shirt.

-TRUTH-

I HAD THE IMPRESSION I had slept for an exceptionally long time- my body was stiff as I hadn't moved once through all this time, either. My brain was baffled and slow; strange, colorful dreams and nightmares swirled dizzily encompassing the inside of my head.

They were so accurate. The terrible and the heavenly, all mixed up in a weird mess. There was a strong impatience and fear, both part of this frustrating fantasy where your feet can't move fast enough... And there were plenty of dragons, red-eyed demons who were all the most horrible for their hollow civility.

The dream was still strong- I could even remember the names.

All the same and all, the strongest and clearest part of the dream was not horror. It was the angel that was clearest.

It was hard to let him go and wake up. This vision did not want to be pushed into the vault of the images that I refused to stay. I struggled with it as my mind became more alert, focusing on reality. I didn't remember what day of the week it was, though, and everything, I was sure that Marcel or school or work or something was waiting for me. I breathed deeply, wondering how to cope with another day.

Something cold hit my forehead with the softest pressure.

I pressed my eyes more closed. I was still dreaming, it seemed, and it felt exceptionally real. I was so close to waking up... one second to the next now, and it would have disappeared. Still, I recognized that it was too real, too real to be good for me. The stone arms I imagined wrapped in myself were far too abundant. If I let go of it go further, I would be melancholy to her later. With a resigned sigh, I tore off my eyelids to dispel the illusion.

'Oh! I gasped and threw my fists at my eyes.

Well, I had gone too far; It must have been a mistake to let my imagination get out of control.

Okay, so 'leave' was the wrong word.

I had forced him out of my hand followed my hallucinations- and now my mind had broken.

It took me less than half a second to realize that, if I was crazy now, I might as well enjoy the illusions when they were nice.

I opened my eyes and Marcel was still there, his perfect face a few inches from mine.

Part: 11

## Terrify

'Did I threaten you? His deep voice was troubled. It was particularly good because the misconceptions were going. The face, the call, the smell, it was so much better than drowning. The magnificent invention of my creativity looked at my changing expressions, with concern. His irises were black, with shades of blue with bruises under them.

He surprised me; in my hallucinatory, they were better fed.

I blinked twice, desperately trying to remember the last thing I was sure was real. Olivia was part of my dream, and I was wondering if she had come back at all, or if it was just the preamble. I thought she came back the day I almost drowned...

Oh, I snapped. My throat was thick when I was sleeping. 'What's wrong,' we asked him.

I disapproved, unfortunately. His face was even more anxious than before.

'I am dead, right? I moaned. 'I do not drown. Damn, shit! It is going to kill Jack.

Marcel frowned, too. 'You're not dead.

'So why don't I wake up? I defied, raising my eyebrows.

'Are you awake?

I shook my head. 'Of course, of course.

That's what you want me to think. And then it'll be worse when I wake up. If I wake up, I don't want because I'm dead.

It's awful. Poor Jack. And Ayanna and Maggie... I followed with horror what I had done.

'I can see where you might confuse me with a nightmare. His short smile was dark. 'All the same and all, I can't imagine what you could have done to end up in hell.

Did you commit a lot of murders while I was away? I grimaced. 'No, no, no, if I were in hell, you wouldn't be with me.

He sighed.

My head was getting clearer. My eyes wavered away from his face against his will, for a second, towards the dark and open window, and then towards him. I started to remember the details... and I felt a weak and unknown blush warm the skin on my cheekbones as I slowly realized that Marcel was here with me, and I was wasting time being an idiot.

'Did all this happen, then? It was almost impossible to reallocate my dream to reality. I couldn't wrap my head around the concept.

'It depends.' Marcel's smile was still difficult. 'If you're talking about us being shot in Italy, then, yes.

'How strange,' I mused. 'I went to Italy. Is that

I had never been more east than Albuquerque?

He rolled his eyes. 'You should go back to sleep. You are not consistent.

'I am not tired anymore. Everything was fine now. 'What time is it? How long have I been sleeping?

'It is just after one o'clock in the morning. So, for about fourteen hours.

I stretched out while he was talking. I was so stiff.

'Jack? I asked.

Marcel frowned: 'Sleep... you should know that I am breaking the rules right now. Well, not technically, since he said, I should never walk through his door again, and I went out the window...

All the same and everything, again, the intention was clear.

'Jack banished you from the house? I asked, disbelief quickly blended into fury.

His eyes were sad. 'Did you expect anything else?

My eyes were crazy. I was going to have a few words with my father- it would be an enjoyable time to remind him that I was over the legal age of adulthood. It did not matter, of course, except in principle. Too soon, there would be no reason for the ban. I turned my thoughts to less painful avenues.

'What's the story? I asked, curious, all the same, and all, desperately trying to keep the conversation casual, to keep a firm grip on myself, so that I would not scare him with the frantic, gnawing craving that was raging in me.

'What do you mean by that?

'What do I say to Jack? What is my excuse to disappear for... How long have I been gone? I tried to count the hours in my head.

Only three days. His eyes tightened, all the same, and all, he smiled more naturally this time.

'In fact, I was hoping you could have a good explanation.

I have nothing.

I moaned. It is fabulous.



'Well, maybe Olivia will find something,' he offered, trying to comfort me.

And I was comforted. Who cared what I had to deal with later? Every second he was here so close, his flawless face glowing in the dim light of the numbers on my alarm clock was precious and not wasted.

Part: 12

Undying Faith

'So,' I started, choosing the least important question, but still of vital importance, to begin with. I was delivered safely to the house, and he might decide to leave at any time. I had to get him to talk. Moreover, this temporary sky was not entirely complete without the sound of his voice. 'What did you do, until three days ago?

His face was engaged in an instant.

'Nothing exciting.

'Of course not,' I mumbled.

'Why do you make this face?

'Well... I put my lips in the bag, I saw. 'If you were just a dream, that is exactly the kind of thing you said. My imagination must be used.

He sighed. 'If I tell you, will you finally believe that you are not having a nightmare?

'Nightmare! I rehearsed with contempt. He waited for my answer. 'Perhaps,' I said after a second of reflection. If you tell me.

'I was... hunting.

'Is this the best you can do? I have been criticizing.

'It does not prove that I am awake.

He falters, then preaches slowly, choosing his words carefully. 'I was not hunting food for the feet... I was trying my hand to... tracking. I am not very qualified for that.

'What were you following? I asked, intrigued.

'It is nothing to do with that. His words did not correspond to his expression; he looked upset, uncomfortable.

'I do not understand.

He hesitated; his face, shining with a strange green plaster of the light of the clock, was torn.

He took a deep breath. 'I owe you an apology. No, of course, I owe you a lot, much more than that. All the same and everything, you must know, 'the words started to flow so fast, the way I remembered that he sometimes spoke when he was restless, that I had to concentrate to catch them all. That I had no idea.

I did not know the mess I was leaving behind. I thought it was safe for you here. So, safe. I had no idea that Jenna, her lips curled up when he said the name, would return. I confess when I saw her that I had already paid much more attention to James' thoughts. Still, I did not see that she had that kind of answer in her. That she even had such a connection with him. I realize why now she was so sure of him, the thought of him failing never came to her heart. It was his overconfidence that clouded his feelings about him that prevented me from seeing the depth of them, the bond there.

'Not that there is an excuse for what I let you face. When I heard what you said to Olivia- what she saw herself-

when I realized that you were going to put your life in the hands of werewolves, immature, volatile, the worst thing out there apart from Jenna herself- he shuddered, and the gushing of words stopped for a short second. 'Please know that I had no idea of any of this. I feel sick, sick to my heart, even now, when I can see you and feel safe in my arms. I am the most miserable excuse for... Stop it.

I interrupted him. He looked at me with anguished eyes, and I tried to find the right words, the words that would free him from that imaginary obligation that was causing him so much pain. These are exceedingly difficult words to say. I did not know if I could get them out without breaking down. All the same and everything, I had to try to get it right. I did not want to be a source of guilt and anguish in his life. He should be happy, no matter what it costs me.

I was hoping to postpone this part of our last conversation. It was going to put an end to things much sooner.

By relying on all my months of training trying to be normal for Jack, I kept my face smooth. 'Marcel,' I said. His name burned my throat a little at the exit. I felt the ghost of the hole, waiting to tear again as soon as it disappeared. I did not quite see how I was going to survive this time. 'It must stop now. You cannot think of it that way. You cannot let that... guilt... rule over your life. You cannot take responsibility for what is happening to me here. None of this is your fault, it is just part of how life is for me. So, if I am traveling in front of a bus or anything next time, you must realize that it is not your job to take the blame.

You cannot go to Italy because you feel bad for not saving me. Even if I had jumped off that cliff to die, it would have been my choice, not your fault. I know it is up to you... your nature takes the blame for everything, all the same, and

everything, you really cannot let that make you go to such extremes! This is a very irresponsible thing on the part of Isla and Joh and...

I was about to lose him. I stopped breathing deeply, hoping to calm down. I had to free him. I had to make sure it did not happen again.

'It's a Karly,' he murmured, 'the strangest expression that crosses his face.' He almost looked crazy. 'Do you think I asked the department to kill me because I felt guilty?

I felt the empty misunderstanding on my face.

'Isn't it?

'Do you feel guilty? Intensely, then.

More than you can understand.

'So... What are you saying? I don't understand.

'Bell, I went to the ministry because I thought you were dead,' he said, his voice soft, his eyes fierce. Even if I had not had my hand in your death,' he shuddered, whispering the last word, even if it was not my fault, I would have gone to Italy. I should have been more careful, I should have spoken directly to Olivia, rather than accepting Rose's opportunity. All the same and all the things I had to think about when the boy said Jack was at the funeral? What are the odds?

'The odds...' he murmured then, distracted. Her voice was so low that I wasn't sure I heard it correctly. 'The odds are always stacked against us. Error after error.

I'll never criticize Romeo again.

'All the same and everything, I still don't understand,' I said.

'That's all I mean. What are you doing?

'Excuse me?

'What if I were dead?

He looked at me dubiously for a long time before answering. 'Do you remember anything I told you before?

'I remember everything you told me. Including words that had denied everything else.

He stroked the tip of his fresh finger against my lower lip. 'Bell, you are under a misconception. He sealed his eyes, shaking his head back and forth with a half-smile on his gorgeous face.

It was not a happy smile. 'I thought I had explained it before. Bell, I cannot live in a world where you do not exist.

'I am... My head was swimming while I was looking for the right word. 'Confused.' It worked. I did not understand what he was saying.

He looked deeply into my eyes with his sincere and earnest look. 'I am a good liar,

Bell, I must be.

I stopped; my flesh locked like the collision. The fault line in my wavy chest; the effort of it took my wind away.

He shook my shoulder, trying to loosen my rigid pose. 'Let me finish! I am a good liar, though, and everything, again, so you will believe me so fast. He won. 'It was... atrocious. I waited, always frozen.

'When we were in the forest when I said goodbye

I didn't allow myself to remember that. I fought to keep myself in the current second only.

'You were not going to let go,' he murmured. 'I could see that. I didn't want to do it, I felt like it would kill me to do it anyway and all that, I knew that if I couldn't convince you that I didn't love you anymore, it would take you so long to go on with your life. I was hoping that if you thought I had moved on, so would you.'

'A clean break,' I murmured through impassive lips.

'Exactly. All the same and all, I never imagined it would be so easy to do! I thought it would be almost impossible for you to be so sure of the truth that I could stay between my teeth for hours to even plant the seed of doubt in your head.'

I lied, and I'm sorry because I hurt you, sorry because it was a worthless effort. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from who I am. I lied to save you, and it didn't work. Excuse me.

'All the same and all, how could you believe me? After a thousand times, I told you that I loved you, how could you let a word break your faith in me?'

I did not respond. I was too shocked to form a rational answer.

'I could see it in your eyes, that you honestly thought I didn't want you anymore. The most absurd concept, ridiculous, as if there were none so that I could exist without needing you!'

I was still frozen... His words were incomprehensible because they were impossible.

He shook my shoulder again, not hard, all the same, and all that, enough for my teeth to tremble a little. 'Bell,' he sighed. 'Really, what do you think!'

So, I started crying. Tears gushed out and gushed miserably down my cheeks.

'I knew it,' he sobbed. 'I knew I was dreaming.

'You are impossible,' said he, 'and he laughed once a hard and frustrated laugh. How can I put this on so you can believe me? You do not sleep, and you are not dead. I am here, and I love you. I have always loved you, and I will always love you. I thought of you, seeing your face in my mind, every second I was away. When I told you I did not want you, it was the darkest blasphemy.

I shook my head as tears continued to ooze from the corners of my eyes.

'You don't believe me, do you?' 'Why can you believe the lie, all the same, and everything, not the truth?

'It never made sense for you to love me,' I explained, his voice breaking twice. I have always known that.

His eyes were narrowing; his jaw clenched.

'I will prove that you are awake,' he promised.

He grabbed my face firmly in his iron hands, ignoring my struggles when I tried to turn my head.

'Please don't do it,' he murmured.

He stopped his lips just half an inch from mine.

'Why not?' His breath blew in my face, swirling my head.

'When I wake up'- He opened his mouth to protest, so I revised- 'Okay, forget that when you leave again, it's going to be hard without it too.

He recoiled an inch, to look me in the face.

'Yesterday, when I touched you, you were so... hesitant, so cautious, and yet always the same. I need to know why. Is it because I'm too late? Because I hurt you too much? Because you moved on, like I wanted you to, too? That would be... Quite right.

I'm not going to challenge your decision. So don't try to spare my feelings, tell me now if you can still love me I've done to you. Anc?

'What stupid question is that?

'You just must answer. Please

I watched it darkly for a long time. 'The way I feel for you will never change. Of course, I love you and there is nothing you can do about it!

'That's all I needed to hear.

His mouth was on mine at the time, and I couldn't fight him. Not because he was a thousand times stronger than me, but all the same, and all because my will collapsed to dust off the second our lips met. This kiss was not as careful as others I remembered, which suited me very well. If I wanted to get the best out of the business as possible.

So, I kissed him back, my heart pounding a jagged and disjointed rhythm while my breath turned to the pants and my fingers moved impatiently on his face. I felt his marble body against all my lines, and I was so glad he didn't listen to me. No pain in the world would have justified missing this. His hands memorized my face, in the same way that mine traced his, and in the brief seconds when his lips were free, he whispered my name.



When I started to feel dizzy, he left, to put his ear against my heart.

I fanned, dazed, waiting for my gasping to slow down and calm down.

" he said casually.

'I'm not going to leave you.

I didn't say anything, and he heard the skepticism in my silence.

He raised his face to lock my gaze into his. 'I'm not going anywhere. Not without you, ' he added more seriously.

'I only left you in the first place because I wanted you to have a chance of a normal, happy, human life. I could see what I was doing to you, keep you constantly on the brink of danger, move away from the world you belonged to, risk your life every time I was with you.

I had to try. I had to do something, and it seemed like leaving was the only way. If I hadn't thought you'd be better off, I would never have been able to leave. I'm way too selfish.

You alone could be more important than what I wanted... what I needed. What I want, and what I need, is to be with you, and I know I will never be strong enough to leave again. I have too many excuses to stay. Thank God for that! You cannot be safe, no matter how many kilometers I put between us.

'Don't promise me anything,' he murmured. If I let myself hope, and it came to nothing... that would kill me. Where all these ruthless angels had not been able to finish me off, hope would do the job.

The anger glinted metallic into his black eyes.

'You think I'm lying to you now?

'No- don't lie... I shook my head, trying to think about it coherently. Examine the assumption that he loves me while remaining objective, clinical so that I do not fall into the trap of hope. 'You could say it... Right away. And tomorrow, when you think about all the reasons you left? Or next month, when Ray gives me trusting ed?

He flinches...

I thought about the last days of my life before he left me, I tried to see them through the filter of what he was telling me now. From this point of view, imagining that he had left me while loving me, left me for me, his smoking and cold silences took on a different meaning. 'It's not like you didn't think about the first decision though, is it? I guessed it. 'You'll end up doing what you think is right.

'I'm not as strong as you give me credit for,' he says. Good and evil have ceased to mean a great deal to me; I'll be back anyway. Before Rose told me the news, I had already spent trying to live one week at a time, or even one day. I was fighting to spend an hour. It was only a matter of time, and not much before, I showed up at your window and begged you to take me back. I'd be happy to beg now if you want that.

I grimaced... 'Be serious, please.

'Oh, I am, he insisted, blatant now.' Could you try to hear what I am saying? You let me try to explain what you mean to me?

He waited, studying my face as he spoke to make sure I listened.

'Before you, my daughter, my life was like a moonless night. Very dark, All the same, and all, there were star-points of

light and reason... And then you shot at my sky like a meteor. Suddenly, everything was on fire; there was brilliance, there was beauty. When you were gone, when the meteor had fallen on the horizon, everything went black.

Nothing had changed, however, and all my eyes were blinded by the light. I couldn't see the stars. And there was no reason for anything.

I wanted to believe it. All the same and everything, it is my life without him that he described, not the other way around.

'Your eyes will adjust,' I mumbled. 'That's just the problem- they can't.

'What about your distractions?

He laughed without any trace of humor. 'Just part of the lie, love. There was no distraction from... agony. My heart hadn't beat for ninety years, however, and everything was different. It was as if my heart had disappeared as if I were hollow.

As if I had left everything in me here with you.

'It's funny,' he whispered.

He had perfect eyebrows.

'Is it funny?

'I meant strange; I thought it was just me. A lot of pieces of mine are gone too. I have not been able to breathe for so long. I filled my lungs, luxuriating in sensation. 'And my heart. It was lost.

He closed his eyes and put his ear back to my heart. I left my cheek pressed against her hair, felt the texture of it on my skin, felt the delicious scent of it.

'The follow-up was not a distraction then? I asked, curious, and needed to distract me. I was in great danger of hoping. I could not stop for long. My heart was beating, singing in my chest.

'No,' he sighed. This has never been a distraction. It was an obligation.

'What does that mean?

'It means that even though I didn't expect Jenna to be in danger, I wasn't going to let her get away with...' As I said, I was horrible. I traced it to Texas, anyway, and everything, and then I followed a false trail to Brazil, and it came here. He is moaning.

'I was not even on the right continent!

And all the time, worse than my worst fears...

'You were hunting with Jenna? I screamed half as soon as I could find my voice, pulling through two octaves.

Jack's distant snoring stuttered, then tightened a steady rhythm.

'Not well,' replied Marcel, studying my outraged expression with a confused look. All the same and everything, I'm going to do better this time. It does not stain the air perfectly by breathing and outdoors for much longer.

'It's... out of the question, I managed to suffocate. madness. Even if he had Emmah or Ray to help him. Even if he had Emmah and Ray to help him. It was worse than my other imaginations: Marcel Black standing through a small space of Jenna's vicious and feline figure. I couldn't bear to imagine

Marcel there, even though he was so much more durable than my half-human best friend.

'It's too late for her. I may have let go the other time, all the same, and everything, not now, not after

I interrupted him again, trying to sound calm. 'Didn't you just promise you wouldn't leave? I asked, fighting the words as I said them, or letting them crash into my heart. 'It's not exactly compatible with an extended tracking expedition, is it?

He frowned... with a grunt began to build down in his chest. 'I'm going to keep my promise. All the same and everything, Jenna'-the grunt has become more pronounced- is going to die.

'Soon... »

'Let's not hurry,' I said, trying to hide my panic. 'She won't come back. Maggie's pack scared her. There is no reason to go and get it.

Plus, I have bigger problems than Jenna.

Marcel's eyes narrowed, all the same, and all he nodded. 'That's true. Werewolves are a problem.

I snorted. 'I was not talking about Marcel. My problems are much worse than a handful of teenage wolves who are in trouble.

Marcel seemed to be about to say something and then thought better of him.

His teeth clicked together, and he spoke through them. 'Really?' 'So, what would be your biggest problem? This would make

Jenna is back for you seem to be a consequential question in comparison?

'How about the second largest? I covered up.

'Okay,' he accepted suspiciously.

I took a break. I was not sure I could say the name.  
'There are others who come to pick me up,' he reminds me with a hushed murmur.

He sighed anyway, and everything, the reaction was not as strong as I would have imagined after his answer to Jenna.

'Is the department only the second largest?

'You don't seem so upset about it,' I noted.

'Well, we have a lot of time to think about it. Time means something quite different to them than to you or even me. They count the years as you count the days. I would not be surprised if you were thirty years before crossing their mind again,' he added lightly.

Horror went through me.

thirty...???

His promises meant nothing in the end. If I were 30 one day, he might not have intended to stay long. The intense pain of this knowledge made me realize that I had already begun to hope, without allowing me to make 5.0.

'You don't have to be afraid,' he says, anxiously watching the tears towing over the rims of my eyes. 'I am not going to let them hurt you.

While you are here. Not that I cared about what happened to me when he left.

He took my face between his two stone hands, holding it firmly while his midnight eyes looked into mine with the gravitational force of a black hole. 'I will never leave you again.

'All the same, and everything, you say thirty,' he murmured. Tears covered the edge.

'What is it? You are going to stay, all the same, and all this, let me grow old anyway? It is true.

His eyes softened, while his mouth went hard. 'That's exactly what I am going to do.

What choice do I have? I can't be without you, though, and all of you, I won't destroy your soul.

'Is it... I tried to keep my voice even, all the same, and everything, this question was too difficult. I remembered his face when Aron almost begged him to consider making me immortal. The sick is looking over there. Was this fixation to keep me human really on my soul, or was it because he wasn't sure he wanted me to stay that long? 'Yes?' he asked, waiting for my question.

I asked for another one.

Anything and everything, not as hard.

'All the same and all, what about when I'm so old that people think I'm your mother? Your grandmother? My voice was pale with revulsion- I could see Gran's face again in the dream mirror.

His whole face was soft now.

He brushed the tears off my cheek with his lips. 'It means nothing to me,' he breathed against my skin. You'll always be the most beautiful thing in my world. Of course, he hesitated, flinching slightly. 'If you outsmarted me- if you

wanted something more- I would understand that Bell. I promise I won't stand in your way if you want to leave me.

His eyes were onyx liquid and quite sincere. He spoke as if he had put infinite amounts of thought into this asinine plan. 'You realize I'm going to die one day, don't you? I demanded...

He had thought about that part, too. 'I'll follow as soon as I can.

'It's serious... I found the right word. 'Sick!!!'

'Bell is the only road from right to left

'Let's come back for a minute,' I said. feeling angry, it was so much easier to be clear, decisive. 'You remember the

Department, used in this job. I can't be human forever. They're going to kill me. Even if they don't think about me until I'm 30, I've tightened up the words, do you think they'll forget?

'No,' he replied slowly, shaking his head. 'They won't forget. All the same and all?

'All the same and all...?

He smiled when I looked at him suspiciously.

I wasn't the only crazy one.

'I have some plans.

'And these plans,' said I, 'my voice becomes more acidic with every word.' 'These plans all around me remain human.

My attitude has hardened its expression. 'Of course. His tone was abrupt, his divine face arrogant.

We shone for a long minute.



Then I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and pushed back his arms so I could sit down.

'Do you want me to leave?' he asked, 'and it made my heart float to see that this idea was hurting him, even though he was trying not to show it.

'No,' I said. 'I am 19 years old.

He looked at me suspiciously as I got out of bed and groped in the darkroom, looking for my shoes.

'Mary, I ask you where you are going,' he asked.

'I'm going to your house,' I said, feeling still blind.

He got up and came to my side. 'Here are your shoes. How did you intend to do that?

'My truck.

'He's going to wake up

Jack, did he offer as a deterrent.

I sighed. 'I know. All the same and everything, honestly, I'm going to be punished for weeks as it is. How much trouble can I get?

'None. He's going to be mad at me, not you.

'If you have a better idea, I'm all ears.

'Stay here,' he suggested, 'and his expression was not hopeful.'

No dice. All the same and all, you go ahead and make yourself at home, 'I encouraged, surprised at how much my teasing sounded, and walked to the door.

He was there before me, blocking my way.

I frowned and turned to the window. It wasn't that far to the ground, and it was mostly grass underneath...

'Okay,' he sighed. 'I'll give you a ride.'

I shrugged. 'Anyway. All the same and everything, you should be there, too.'

'And why is it?'

'Because you are extraordinarily opinisable, and I am sure you will want a chance to express your opinions.'

'My point of view on what subject? He asked through his teeth.'

'It is not just about you anymore. You are not the center of the universe, you know. My world was, of course, a different story. 'If you want to bring the ministry down on us on something as stupid as leaving me human, then your family should have a say.'

'A word in what?'

'My mortality. I am putting him in the polls.'

-VOTE-

HE WAS NOT HAPPY, THAT

PLENTY IS FACILE TO READ about it

face. All the same and everything, without any other argument, he took me in his arms and jumped out my window, landing without the slightest jolt, like a cat. It was a little lower than I had imagined.

'All right,' he said, his voice bubbling with disapproval.'

'Upstairs, you're 1,20th.'

He helped me on my back and ran away. Even after all this time, it was routine. easy.

It was something you had never forgotten, like riding a bike.

It was so quiet and dark that he ran through the forest, his breathing slowly and even dark as the trees flying in front of us were almost invisible, and only the rush of air in my face gave our speed. The air was moist; he did not burn my eyes as the wind in the wonderful place had, and it was comforting.

As it was night, too, after that terrifying brightness. Like the thick quilt I played under as a child, the darkness felt familiar and protective.

I remembered that running in the forest like this scared me, that I closed my eyes. It seemed like a silly reaction to me now. I kept my eyes wide, his chin resting on his shoulder, my cheek against his neck. The speed was exhilarating.

A hundred times better than the bike.

I turned my face towards him and thought on my lips of the cold stone skin of his neck.

'Thank you,' said he, as the vague, black shapes of the trees passed before us.

'Does this mean that you have decided that you are awake?

I laughed. The sound was easy, natural, effortless. It looked good. 'Not really. More than that, anyway, I am not trying to wake up. Not tonight.

'I will gain your trust one way or another,' he murmured, especially to himself. 'If this is my last act.' I trust you, I assured him.

'It is me; I do not trust.

'Please explain this.

It had slowed down to a walk- I could tell because the wind stopped, and we were near to home. I thought I might make the sound of the river rushing somewhere nearby in the dark.

I had a tough time figuring out the right way to formulate it. 'I do not trust myself to be... enough. To deserve you. There is nothing in me that can hold you back.

He stopped and reached around to remove me from his back. His soft hands did not free me; after putting me back on his feet, he wrapped his arms tightly around me, hugging me to his chest.

'Your hold is permanent and unbreakable,' he murmured. 'Never doubt that.

All the same and all, how could I not?

'You never told me...' he murmured.

'What is it?

'What's your biggest problem is.

'I will give you a guess. I sighed and reached out to touch the tip of his nose with my index finger.

He nodded. 'I'm worse than the department,' he says sadly. 'I deserved it.

Part: 13

Why and why

I rolled my eyes. The worst the department can do is kill me.

He waited with tense eyes.

'You can leave me,' I said. 'The ministry, Jenna... they are nothing compared to that.'

Even in the darkness, I could see the anguish turning his face-he reminded me of his expression under Jane's torturing gaze; I felt sick and regretted telling the truth.

'Don't do it,' he whispered, touching his face.

'Don't be sad.'

He pulled a corner of his shy mouth, all the same, and the whole expression did not touch his eyes. 'If there was only one way to make you see that I cannot leave you,' he murmured. 'Time, I suppose, will be the way to convince you.'

I liked the idea of time.

'Okay,' he agreed.

His face was still tormented. I tried to distract him inconsequentially.

'So, since you're staying. Can I get my stuff back? I asked, making my tone as light as I could handle.

My attempt worked to some extent: he laughed. Nevertheless, and all, his eyes have retained misery. 'Your business has never gone away,' he told me. 'I knew it was wrong since I promised you peace without reminders. It was stupid and childish, though, and all of that, I wanted to leave something of myself with you. The CD, the photos, the tickets, they're all under your floors.'

'Really?'

He nodded, seeming slightly applauded by my obvious pleasure in this trivial fact. It was not enough to completely cure the pain in my face.

'I think,' I said slowly, 'that I am not sure, all the same, and everything, I wonder.' I think maybe I knew that all the time.

'What did you know?

I just wanted to take the agony in his eyes, all the same, and everything, as I said the words, they sounded truer than I expected they would.

'Part of me, my subconscious, never stopped believing that you still cared if I lived or died.

That is why I heard the voices.

There was a very deep silence for a while. 'Voice?' he asked categorically.

'Well, just one voice. It's a long story. The suspicious look on his face made me wish I hadn't raised that. Would he think I was crazy, like everyone else? Was everyone right about that? All the same and everything, at least that expression- the one that made it look like something burned it- faded away.

I've got time. His voice was exceptionally even. 'It's pretty pathetic.

He waited.

I was not sure how to explain myself. 'Do you remember what Olivia said about extreme sports?

He uttered the words without inflection or accent. 'You jumped off a cliff for fun.

Uh, that is all. And before that, with the motorcycle

'Motorcycle? I knew his voice well enough to hear something that was preparing behind the quiet. 'I guess I did not mention Olivia about that part.

'Not!

'Well, about that... You see, I found that... when I was doing something dangerous or stupid... I remembered you more clearly,' I confessed, feeling completely mental. 'I could remember how your voice sounded when you were angry. I could hear it like you were right there next to me. Most of the time, I tried not to think about you, and it did not hurt so much that it was like you were protecting me again. Like you do not want me to get hurt.

'And, well, I wonder if the reason I could hear you so clearly was that, below all this. I always knew that you had not stopped loving me.

Again, as I was speaking, the words brought with them a sense of conviction. That is right.

A deep place in me recognized the truth.

His words came out half strangled.

'You... were... risking your life... to hear-'

'Sh-h,' I interrupted him. Wait a second. I think I'm going to have an epiphany here.

I thought about that night in Pittsburgh when I had my first illusion. I'd have two options. Madness or fulfillment of wishes.

I had not seen any third option.

All the same and everything, and if...

What if you thought something was true, all the same, and all that, you were wrong? What if you were so stubbornly without too many thoughts, of course in everything, that you are right, that you would not even consider the truth and submit your realities?

Would the truth be silenced, or would it attempt to unravel?

Third option: Marcel loved me. The bond between us could not be broken by absence, distance or time.

-And-

No matter how much more special, beautiful, brilliant, or perfect than me, it could be, it was as irreversibly altered as I was. As I always belonged to him, it would always be mine.

Is that what I was trying to tell myself?

« Oh!

« Bell?

'Oh, oh. All right. I see.

'Your epiphany is?' he asked, his voice uneven and tense with the grater.

'You love me,' I marveled. The feeling of conviction and waterproofing crossed me again.

Although his eyes were still anxious, the crooked smile I liked best flashed on his face. 'Really, I do.

My heart swelled like it was going to break my ribs. He filled my chest and blocked my throat so I couldn't talk.

He wanted me the way I wanted me forever. It was only fear for my soul, for human things that he did not want to take



from me, which made him so desperate to leave me mortal. Compared to the fear he did not want from me, this obstacle- my soul- seemed almost insignificant.

He took my face tightly between his fresh hands and kissed me until I was so stunned the forest was spinning. Then he thought of himself against mine, and I wasn't the only one breathing harder than usual.

'You were better than me, you know,' he told me.

'Better at what?

'Surviving... At least you tried. You got up in the morning, you tried to be normal for Jack, you followed the pattern of your life. When I wasn't actively followed, I was... useless. I couldn't be with my family; I couldn't be with anyone. I am embarrassed to admit that I curled up in a ball and let the misery have me.

He smiles a little shyly. 'It was much more pathetic than hearing voices. And, of course, you know, so am I.

I was deeply relieved that he seemed to understand- comforted that all this made sense to him. In any case, he didn't look at me like I was crazy. He looked at me like... He loved me.

'I have heard only one voice,' I corrected him.

He laughed, then pulled me tight against his right side and started driving me forward.

'I'm just humor you with that. He went wide with his hand towards the darkness in front of us as we walked. There was something pale and huge out there- the house I realized. 'It doesn't matter what they say at all.' It affects them now, too.

He shrugged indifferently towards me, then led me through the open front door into the bleak house and lit the

lights; the room was exactly as I had remembered- the piano and the white sofas and the pale, massive staircase; no dust, no white sheets.

Marcel called the names without more volume than I would use in regular conversation. 'Joh?

Isla? Rose? Emmah, is that you? ray?

Olivia? They could hear.

Joh was suddenly standing next to me as if he had been there from the beginning. Welcome, Bell. He smiles: 'What can we do for you this morning? I imagine, because of the weather, that this is not a purely social visit?

I nodded. 'I would like to talk to everyone at once if it is okay.

About something important.

I could not help but look at Marcel's face while I was talking. His expression was still critical and all resigned. When I looked at Joh, he was looking at Marcel too.

'Of course,' Joh says. Why not talk in the other room?

Joh led the way through the bright living room, at the corner of the dining room, and turned on the lights as he went. The walls were white, the ceilings high, like the living room. In the centre of the room, under the low hanging chandelier, was a large polished oval table surrounded by eight chairs. Joh was holding a chair in my head.

I had never seen the Grange use the dining room table before it was just an accessory.

They did not eat in the house.

As soon as I turned to sit in the chair, I saw that we were not alone; Isla had followed Marcel, and behind her, the rest of the family fell.

Joh was sitting on my right, and Marcel on my left. All the others took their seats in silence. Olivia was smiling at me, already on the plot. Emmah and Ray looked curious, and Rose smiled at me tentatively. My reply smile was just as shy. It was going to take a little time to get used to it.

Joh nodded.

'The ground is yours.

Part: 14

Nervous

I swallowed. Their eyes made me nervous. Marcel took my hand under the table. I looked at him all the same, and everything, he was looking at the others, his fate suddenly ferocious.

'Well,' he said. I hope Olivia has already told you everything that has happened in

Va-t-il volterra?

'Everything,' Olivia assured me.

I gave him a meaningful look.

'And on the way?' That too,' she nodded.

'Well,' I sighed with relief.

'So, we're all on the same page.

They waited patiently while I tried to control my thoughts.

'So-o, I have a problem, I started. Olivia promised the department that I would become one of you. They'll send someone to check, and I'm sure that's a sad thing to avoid.

'And so, now it involves you all. I'm sorry about that. I looked at each of their beautiful faces, saving the most beautiful for the end. Marcel's mouth was turned into a grimace. 'All the same and everything, if you don't want me, then I'm not going to force myself on you, whether Olivia is ready or not.

Isla opened her mouth to talk, all the same, and everything, I held a finger to stop him.

'Please let me finish. You all know what I want. And I'm sure you know what Marcel thinks, too. I think the only fair way to decide is for everyone to have a vote if you decide you don't want me, so... I guess I'll go back to Italy alone, I can't bring them here. My crumpled forehead that I considered that way.

There was the slight rumble of a growl in Marcel's chest. I ignored it.

'Given, then, that I am not going to put any of you in danger, anyway, I want you to vote yes or no on the question of me becoming an angel. I smiled half on the last word and gestured towards

Joh for starters. 'Just for a minute,' Marcel interrupted.

I was looking at him through narrowed eyes. He raised his eyebrows at me, shaking my hand. 'I have something to add before I vote.

I sighed...

'About the danger, Bell is talking about him,' he said. 'I do not think we need to be too anxious.

His expression has become more animated. He put his free hand on the shiny table and thought forward.

'You see,' he said, looking around the table as he spoke, 'there was more than one reason why I didn't want to shake Aron's hand at the end, there's something they didn't think about, and I didn't want dinner,' he smiled.

'Who was it? Olivia pushed; I was sure my expression was as skeptical as the sisters'.

'The department is overconfident, and rightly so. When they decide to find someone, it is not a problem. Remember Eametri? He looked at me.

I shivered. He took that as a yes.

'He finds people- that is his talent, why they keep him.

'Now, all the time we were with one of them, I was choosing their brains for anything that could save us, get as much information as possible. I have seen how Eametri's talent works. He is a tracker, a tracker a thousand times better than Jarres. His ability is loosely related to what I do, or what Aron does. He catches them... flavor? I do not know how to describe it... The tenor... of someone's mind, and then he follows that. It works over long distances.

'All the same and all, after Aron's little experiences, well... Marcel shrugged.

'You think he won't be able to find me,' I said absolutely.

That was enough. 'I'm sure of it.'

It relies entirely on that other meaning. When it does not work out with you, they will all be blind.

'And how does that solve something?

'Absolutely, of course, Olivia will be able to tell when they are planning a visit, and I will hide from you. They will be helpless,' he says with ferocious pleasure. 'It will be like looking for a piece of straw in a haystack!

He and Emmah exchanged a look and a smile.

It did not make any sense. 'All the same, and all that, they can find you,' I reminded him.

'And I can take care of myself.'

Emmah laughed, and reached across the table towards her brother, laying a fist. 'Great plan, brother,' he says enthusiastically.

Marcel extended his arm to strike Emmaus' fist with his own.

'No,' cried Rose.

'Absolutely not,' I agreed.

That is nice. Ray's voice was grateful.

'Idiots,' Olivia whispered.

Isla just looked at Marcel.

I was standing in my chair, focused.

It was my meeting.

'All right, then, Marcel has offered you an alternative to consider,' I said coldly. I looked at Marcel this time; it would be better to get his opinion from the road. 'Do you want me to join your family?

His eyes were as hard and dark as flint.

'Not that way.' You're still human.

I nodded once, keeping my business face, then moved on.

Olivia?

'Yes, it's true.'

Ray?

'Surely,' he said, 'he fell vocally.' I was a little surprised- I hadn't been at all sure about his vote. All the same and everything, I deleted my reaction and moved on.

Ross?

She hesitated, biting on her full and perfect lower lip. No, that is not it.

I kept my face empty and turned my head slightly to move forward, all the same, and everything, she held both her hands, palms forward.

'Let me explain,' she begged. 'I do not mean to say that I have an aversion to you as a sister. It is just that... this is not the life I would have chosen for myself. I wish there were someone to vote no for me.'

I nodded slowly, then turned to Emmah.

'Hell, Surly! He smiles. 'We can find another way to choose a fight with this Eametri.

I was still grimacing when I looked at Isla.

'Yes, of course, girl. I already see you as part of my family.

'Thank you, Isla,' I murmured, turning to Joh.

I was suddenly nervous, wishing I had asked for his vote first. I was sure it was the vote that mattered most, the vote that mattered more than any majority.

Joh was not looking at me.

'Marcel,' he said.

Interval: 3

Obscure Darkness

Chapter: 6

Part: 1

Anxious

'No,' Marcel snarled. His jowl was strained stingy, his lips rolled back from his teeth.

'It's the only way that makes sense,' Ray insisted. 'You've chosen not to live without her, and that doesn't leave me a choice.'

Marcel lowered my hand, shoving me away from the table. He stalked out of the room, grumbling under his breath.

'You know my vote.' Ray sighed.

I was still staring after Marcel. 'Thanks,' I mumbled.

An earsplitting crash echoed from the other room.

I flinched and spoke quickly. 'That's all I needed. Thank you. For wanting to keep me. I feel the same way about all of you, also.' My voice was rough with sensation by the end.

Isla was at my side in a flash, her cold arms around me.



‘Sweetest Bella,’ she breathed, you look just like your real mom, and I know who she was, and she was lovely, yet I can say to this day over fear.

I held her back. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ross glancing down at the table, and I understood, understood that my words could be construed in two ways.

‘Well, Olivia,’ I said when Isla released me. ‘Where do you want to do this?’

Olivia stared at me, her eyes widening with terror.

‘No! No! No!’

Marcel yelled, charging back into the room. He was in my face where I had time to blink, circling over me, his grimace distorted in rage. ‘Are you crazy?’ He shouted. ‘Have you utterly lost your mind?’

I cringed away, my hands over my ears.

‘Um, girl,’ Olivia interjected in an anxious voice. ‘I do not think I am ready for that. I will need to prepare...’

‘You promised,’ I reminded her, glaring under Marcel’s arm.

‘I know, but... Seriously, girl! I do not have any idea how to not kill you.’

‘You can do it,’ I encouraged. ‘I trust you.’

Marcel snarled in fury.

Olivia shook her head quickly, looking panicked.

‘Ray?’ I turned to look at him.

Marcel grabbed my face in his hand, forcing me to look at him. His other hand was out a palm toward Ray.

Ray ignored that. 'I'm able to do it,' he answered my question. I wished I could see his expression. 'You would be in no danger of me losing control.'

'Sounds good.' I hoped he could understand; it was hard to talk the way Marcel held my jaw.

'Hold on, 'Marcel said between his teeth. 'It doesn't have to be now.'

'There's no reason for it not to be now,' I said, the words coming out distorted.

'I can think of a few.'

'Of course- you can,' I said sourly. 'Now let go of me.'

He freed my face and wrapped his arms across his chest. 'In about two hours, Jack will be here scanning for you. I would not put it past him to involve the policemen.'

'All three of them.' But I frowned.

This was always the hardest part. Jack, Renee. Now Marcel, too. The people I would lose, the people I would hurt. I wished there were some way that I could be the only one to suffer, but I knew that was impossible.

At the same time, I was hurting them more by staying human. Putting Jack in constant danger through my proximity. Putting Maggie in worse danger still by drawing his enemies across the land he felt bound to protect. And Renee-I could not even risk a visit to see my mother for fear of bringing my deadly problems along with me!

I was a danger magnet; I had accepted that about myself.

Accepting this, I knew I needed to be able to take care of myself and protect the ones I loved, even if that meant that I could not be with them. I needed to be strong.

‘In the interest of remaining inconspicuous, ‘Marcel said, still talking through his gritted teeth, but looking at Ray now, ‘I suggest that we put this conversation off, at the very least until Karly Finishes high school, and moves out of Jack's house.’

‘That's a reasonable request, girl,’ Ray pointed out.

I thought about Jack's reaction when he woke up this morning, if after all that life had put him through in the last week with Harry's loss, and then I had put him through with my unexplained disappearance-he where to find my bed empty. Jack deserved better than that. It was just a little more time; graduation was not so far away...

I pursed my lips. ‘I'll consider it.’

Marcel relaxed. His jaw unclenched.

‘I should probably take you home,’ he said, calmer now, but clearly in a hurry to get me out of here. ‘Just in case Jack wakes up early.’

I looked at Ray. ‘After graduation?’

‘You have my word.’

I took a deep breath, smiled, and turned back to Marcel. ‘Okay. You can take me home.’

Marcel rushed me out of the house before Ray could promise me anything else. He took me out the back, so I didn't get to see what was broken in the living room.

It was a tranquil trip home. I was feeling successful, including a little self-righteous. Scared, too, of course, but I heard not to think about that part. It did me no good to worry about the pain-the natural or the emotional- so I wouldn't. Not until I ought to.

When we got to my house, Marcel didn't pause. He dashed up the wall and through my window in half a second. Then he pulled my arms from around his neck and set me on the bed.

I believed I had a clever idea of what he was thinking, but his character surprised me. Instead of being angry, it was anticipating. He paced morosely back and forth across my darkroom while I watched with growing mistrust.

'Whatever you're planning, it's not going to work,' I told him.

'Sh-h... I'm thinking.'

'Ugh,' I groaned, throwing myself back on the bed and pulling the quilt over my head.

There was no sound, but suddenly he was there. He flipped the cover back, so he could see me. He was lying next to me. His hand reached up to brush my hair from my cheek.

'If you don't mind, I'd much rather you didn't hide your face. I've lived without it for as long as I can stand. Now... tell me something.' 'What?' I asked, unwilling.

Part: 2

Creation

'If you could have anything in the world, anything at all, what would it be?'

I could feel the skepticism in my eyes.

‘You.’

He shook his head impatiently.

‘Something you don’t already have.’

I was not sure where he was trying to lead me, so I thought carefully before I answered. I produced something that was both true, and probably impossible.

‘I would want... Ray not to have to do it. I would want you to change me.’

I observed his reflection warily, expecting more of the fury I had noticed at his house. I was astonished that his expression did not change. It was nevertheless calculating, deep, and wise.

‘What would you be willing to trade for that?’

I could not accept my ears. I ogled at his composed face and blurted out the clue before I could think about this.

‘Anything.’

He smiled faintly, and then pursed his lips. ‘Five years?’

My face twisted into an expression somewhere between chagrin and horror.

‘You said anything,’ he reminded me.

‘Yes, but... you will use the time to find a way out of it. I must strike while the iron is hot. Besides, it is just too dangerous to be human-for me, at least. So, anything but that.’

He frowned. ‘Three years?’

‘No!’

'Isn't it worth anything to you at all?'

I thought about how much I wanted this. Better to keep a poker face, I decided, and not let him know how- very much that was. It would give me more leverage. 'Six months?'

He rolled his eyes. 'Not good enough.'

'One year, then,' I said. 'That's my limit.'

'At least give me two.'

'No way. Nineteen I will do. But I am not going anywhere near twenty. If you are staying in your teens forever, then so am I.'

He thought for a minute. 'All right.'

Forget time limits. If you want me to be the one, then you will just have to meet one condition.'

'Condition?' My voice went flat. 'What condition?'

His eyes were cautious he spoke slowly. 'Marry me first.'

I stared at him, waiting... 'Okay. What is the punchline?'

He sighed. 'You're wounding my ego, girl. I just proposed to you, and you think it is a joke.'

'Marcel, please be serious.'

'I am one hundred percent serious.' He eyed cautiously with no hint of joviality on his face. 'Oh, come on,' I said, an edge of insanity in my voice. 'I'm only eighteen.'

'Well, I'm a hundred and ten. It's time I settled down.'

I looked away, out the dark window, trying to control the panic before it gave me away.

‘Look, marriage isn't exactly that high on my list of priorities, you know? It was the kiss of death for Renee and Jack.’

‘Interesting choice of words.’

‘You know what I mean.’

He gasped deeply. ‘Please don’t tell me that you're fearful of the commitment,’ his voice was disbelieving, and I realized what he meant.

‘That's not it exactly,’ I hedged. ‘I'm... afraid of Renee. She has some intense opinions on getting married before you're thirty.’

‘Because she'd rather you became one of the eternal damned than getting married.’ He laughed darkly.

‘You think you're joking.’

‘Girl, if you compare the level of commitment between a marital union as opposed to bartering your soul in exchange for eternity as an angel...’ He shook his head. ‘If you're not brave enough to marry me, then-’

‘Well,’ I interrupted. ‘What if I did?’

What if I told you to take me to Vegas now?

Would I be an angel in three days?’

He smiled, his teeth flashing in the dark.

‘Sure,’ he said, calling my bluff.

‘I'll get my car.’

‘Dammit.’ I muttered. ‘I'll give you eighteen months.’

‘No deal,’ he said, grinning. ‘I like this condition.’

‘Fine. I’ll have Ray do it when I graduate.’

‘If that’s what you want.’ He shrugged, and his smile became angelic.

‘You’re impossible,’ I groaned. ‘A monster.’ He chuckled. ‘Is that why you won’t marry me?’

I groaned again.

He tilted toward me; his night-dark eyes vanished and smoldered and shattered my concentration. ‘Please, Bella?’ He exhaled.

I misremembered how to inhale for a moment. When I recovered, I shook my head quickly, trying to clear my abruptly clouded mind.

‘Would this have gone better if I’d had time to get a ring?’

‘No! No rings!’ I very nearly snouted.

‘Now you’ve done it,’ he whispered.

‘Oops.’

‘Jack’s getting up; I’d better leave,’ Marcel said with resignation.

My heart stopped beating.

He gauged my expression for a second. ‘Would it be childish of me to hide in your closet, then?’

‘No,’ I whispered eagerly. ‘Stay. Please.’ Marcel smiled and disappeared.

I seethed in the darkness as I waited for Jack to check on me. Marcel knew exactly what he was doing, and I was willing to bet that all the injured surprise was part of the poly.



Of course, I still had the Ray option, but now that I knew there was a chance that Marcel would change me himself, I wanted it badly. He was such a cheater.

My door cracked open.

‘Morning, Dad.’

‘Oh, hey, girl.’ He sounded embarrassed at getting caught. ‘I didn’t know you were awake.’

‘Yeah. I’ve just been waiting for you to wake up, so I can take a shower.’ I started to get up.

‘Hold on,’ Jack said, flipping the light on. I blinked in the sudden brightness, and carefully kept my eyes away from the closet.

‘Let’s talk for a minute first.’

I couldn’t control my grimace. I’d forgotten to ask Olivia for a good excuse.

‘You know you’re in trouble.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘I about went crazy these last three days. I come home from Harry’s funeral, and you’re gone.’

Marcel could only tell me that you had run off with Olivia and that he thought you were in trouble. You did not leave me a number, and you did not call. I did not know where you were or when-or if you were coming back. Do you have any idea how... how...?’ He could not finish the sentence. He sucked in a sharp breath and moved on. ‘Can you give me one reason why- I shouldn’t ship you off to Ashville this second?’

My eyes narrowed. So, it was going to be threats, was it? Two could play that game. I sat up, pulling the quilt around me. 'Because I won't go.'

'Now just one-minute, young lady-'

'Look, Dad, I accept complete responsibility for my actions, and you have the right to ground me for as long as you want. I will also do all the chores and laundry and dishes until you think I've learned my lesson.'

-And-

'I guess you're within your rights if you want to kick me out, too-but that won't make me go to Florida.'

His face turned bright red. He took a few deep breaths before he answered.

'Would you like to explain where you've been?'

Oh, crap... 'There was... an emergency.'

He raised his eyebrows in expectation of my brilliant explanation.

I filled my cheeks with air and then blew it out noisily. 'I don't know what to tell you, Dad. It was mostly a misunderstanding. He said, she said. It got out of hand.'

He waited with a distrustful expression.

'See, Olivia told Rose about me jumping off the cliff...' I was scrambling frantically to make this work, to keep it as close to the truth as possible so that my inability to lie convincingly would not undermine the excuse, but before I could go on, Jack's expression reminded me that he didn't know anything about the cliff.

Major oops as if I wasn't already toasted.

'I guess I didn't tell you about that,' I choked out. 'It was nothing. Just messing around, swimming with Maggie. Anyway, Rose told Marcel, and he was upset. She sort-of accidentally made it sound like I was- trying to kill myself or something. He wouldn't answer his phone, so Olivia dragged me to... L.A., to explain in person.' I shrugged, desperately hoping that he would not be so distracted by my slip that he'd miss the brilliant explanation I'd provided.

Jack's face was frozen. 'Were you trying to kill yourself, baby girl?'

'No, of course not. Just having fun with Maggie. Cliff diving. The La Push kids do it all the time. Like I said, nothing.'

Jack's face heated up from frozen too hot with fury. 'What's it to Marcel Cullen anyway?' he barked. 'All this time, he's just left you are dangling without a word-'

I interrupted him. 'Another misunderstanding.'

His face flushed again. 'So, is he back then?'

'I'm not sure what the exact plan is. I think they all are.'

He shook his head, the veins in his temples pulsing. 'I want you to stay away from him, Bella. I don't trust him. He's nasty to you. I won't allow him to mess you up like that again.'

'Fine,' I said curtly.

Jack rocked back onto his heels. 'Oh.'

He scrambled for a second, exhaling loudly in surprise. 'I thought you were going to be difficult.'

'I am.' I stared straight into his eyes. 'I meant, 'Fine, I'll move out.'

His eyes swelled; his face turned pure. My resolve wavered as I commenced to worry about his well-being. He was no younger than Harry...

‘Dad, I don't want to move out,’ I said in a softer tone. ‘I love you. I know you're worried, but you need to trust me on this. And you're going to have to ease up on Marcel if you want me to stay. Do you want me to live here or not?’

‘That's not fair, baby girl. You know I want you to stay.’

‘Then be nice to Marcel because he's going to be where I am.’ I said it with confidence. The conviction of my epiphany was still strong.

‘Not under my roof,’ Jack stormed.

I sighed a heavy sigh. ‘Look, I'm not going to give you any more ultimatums tonight-or I guess it's this morning. Just think about it for a few days, okay? But keep in mind that Marcel and I are a package deal.’

‘Baby-’

‘Think it over,’ I insisted. ‘And while you're doing that, could you give me some privacy? I need a shower.’

Jack's face was a strange shade of purple, but he left, slamming the door behind him. I heard him stomp furiously down the stairs.

I threw off my quilt, and Marcel was already there, sitting in the rocking chair as if he'd been present through the whole conversation.

‘Sorry about that,’ I whispered.

‘It's not as if I don't deserve far worse,’ he murmured. ‘Don't start anything with Jack over me, please.’

'Don't worry about it,' I breathed as I gathered up my bathroom things and a set of clean clothes. 'I will start exactly as much as is necessary, and no more than that. Or are you trying to tell me I have nowhere to go?' I widened my eyes with a false alarm.

'You'd move in with a house full of angels?'

'That's the safest place for someone like me. Besides...' I grinned.

'If Jack kicks me out, then there's no need for a graduation deadline, is there?'

His jaw tightened. 'So, eager for eternal damnation,' he muttered.

'You know you don't believe that.'

'Oh, don't I?' He fumed.

'No, you don't.'

He glowered at me and started to speak, but I cut him off.

'If you believed that you'd lost your soul, then when I found you in Volterra, you would have realized immediately what was happening, instead of thinking we were both dead together. But you didn't-you say 'Amazing. Ray was right, 'I reminded him, triumphant. 'There's hope in you, after all.'

For once, Marcel was speechless.

'So, let's both just be hopeful, all right?' I suggested. 'Not that it matters. If you stay, I don't need heaven.'

He got up slowly and came to put his hands on either side of my face as he stared into my eyes. 'Forever,' he vowed, still a little staggered.

‘That's all I'm asking for,’ I said and stretched up on my toes so that I could press my lips to his.

#### -EPILOGUE TREATY-

ALMOST EVERYTHING WAS BACK TO NORMAL-THE GOOD, pre-zombie normal-in less time than I would have believed possible. The hospital welcomed Ray back with eager arms, not even bothering to conceal their delight that Isla had found life in P.A. so little to her liking. Thanks to the Calculus test I'd missed while abroad, Olivia and Marcel were in better shape to graduate than I was at the time.

Suddenly, college was a priority (college was still planning B, on the off chance that Marcel's offer swayed me from the postgraduation Ray choice.) Many deadlines had passed me by, but Marcel had a new stack of applications for me to fill out every day. He had already done the Harvard route, so it did not bother him that, thanks to my procrastination, we might both end up at Penn's Community College next year.

Jack was not happy with me or speaking to Marcel. But at least Marcel was allowed during my designated visiting hours inside the house again. I just was not allowed out of it.

School and work were the only exceptions and the dreary, dull yellow walls of my classrooms had become oddly inviting to me of late. That had a lot to do with the person who sat on the desk beside me.

Marcel had resumed his schedule from the beginning of the year, which put him in most of my classes again. My behavior had been such last fall, after the Barn's move to P.A., that the seat beside me had never been filled. Even Mike, always eager to take any advantage, had kept a safe distance. With Marcel back in place, it was as if the last eight months were just a disturbing nightmare.

Almost, but not quite. There was the house arrest situation, for one thing. And for another, before the fall, I had not been best friends with Marcel Black. So, of course, I had not missed him then.

I was not at liberty to go to La Push, and Marcel was not coming to see me. He would not even answer my phone calls.

I made these calls mostly at night after Marcel had been kicked out promptly at nine by a grimly gleeful Jack-and before Marcel snuck back through my window when Jack was asleep. I chose that time to make my fruitless calls because I had noticed that Marcel made a certain face every time, I mentioned Marcel's name. Disapproving and wary... even angry. I guessed that he had some reciprocal prejudice against the horse, though he was not as vocal as Marcel had been about the 'bloodsuckers.'

So, I did not mention Marcel much.

With Marcel near me, it was hard to think about unhappy things-even my former best friend, who was very unhappy right now, due to me. When I did think of Maggie, I always felt guilty for not thinking of him more.

The fairy tale was back on. Prince returned; the bad spell broken. I was not sure exactly what to do about the leftover, unresolved character. Where was his happily ever after?

Weeks passed, and Marcel still would not answer my calls. It started to become a constant worry. Like a dripping faucet in the back of my head that I could not shut off or ignore. Drip, drip, drip. Marcel, Marcel, Marcel.

Part: 3

Allusion

So, though I did not mention Marcel much, sometimes my frustration and anxiety boiled over.

‘It’s just plain rude!’ I vented one Saturday afternoon when Marcel picked me up from work. Being angry about things was easier than feeling guilty. ‘Downright insulting!’

I had varied my pattern, in hopes of a different response. I had called Maggie from work this time, only to get an unhelpful Billy.

Again...

‘Billy said he didn’t want to talk to me,’ I fumed, glaring at the rain oozing down the passenger window.

‘That he was there and wouldn’t walk three steps to get to the phone! Usually, Billy just says he is out or busy or sleeping or something. I mean, it is not like I did not know he was lying to me, but at least it was a polite way to handle it. I guess Billy hates me now, too. It’s not fair!’

‘It’s not you, girl,’ Marcel said quietly.

‘Nobody hates you.’

‘Feels that way,’ I muttered, folding my arms across my chest. It was no more than a stubborn gesture. There was no hole there now- I could barely remember the empty feeling anymore.

‘Marcel knows we’re back, and I’m sure that he’s ascertained that I’m with you,’ Marcel said. ‘He won’t come anywhere near me. The enmity is rooted too deeply.’

‘That’s stupid. He knows you’re not... like other angels.’

‘There’s still a good reason to keep a safe distance.’



I glared blindly out the windshield, seeing only Marcel's face, set in the bitter mask I hated.

'Girl, we are what we are,' Marcel said quietly. 'I can control myself, but I doubt he can. He is incredibly young. It would turn into a fight, and I don't know if I could stop it before I k-' he broke off, and then quickly continued. 'Before I hurt him. You would be unhappy. I don't want that to happen.'

I remembered what Marcel had said in the kitchen, hearing the words with the perfect recall in his husky voice. I am not sure that I am even-tempered enough to handle that...

You would not like it so much if I killed your friend. But he had been able to handle it, that time...

'Marcel,' I whispered. 'Were you about to say 'killed him? Where you?'

He looked away from me, staring into the rain. In front of us, the red light I had not noticed turned green and he started forward again, driving very slowly. Not his usual way of driving.

'I would try... extremely hard... not to do that,' Marcel finally said.

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open, but he continued to look straight ahead.

We paused at the corner stop sign.

Abruptly, I remembered what had happened to Paris when Romeo came back.

The stage directions were simple: They fight.

Paris falls.

But that was ridiculous. Impossible.

‘Well,’ I said, and took a deep breath, shaking my head to dispel the words in my head. ‘Nothing like that is ever going to happen, so there's no reason to worry about it. And you know Jack's staring at the clock right now. You'd better get me home before I get in more trouble for being late.’

I turned my face up toward him, to smile halfheartedly.

Every time I looked at his face, that impossibly perfect face, my heart pounded strong and healthy and very there in my chest. This time, the pounding raced ahead of its usual besotted pace. I recognized the expression on his status till the face.

‘You're already in more trouble, baby girl,’ he whispered through unmoving lips.

I slid closer, clutching his arm as I followed his gaze to see what he was seeing. I do not know what I expected AVA standing in the middle of the street, her flaming red hair blowing in the wind or a line of tall black cloaks... or a pack of an angry horse. But I did not see anything at all.

‘What? What is it?’

He took a deep breath. ‘Jack...’ ‘My dad?’ I screeched.

He looked down at me then, and his expression was calm enough to ease some of my panics.

‘Jack... is probably not going to kill you, but he's thinking about it,’ he told me. He started to drive forward again, down my street, but he passed the house and parked by the edge of the trees.

‘What did I do?’ I gasped.

Marcel glanced back at Jack's house. I followed his gaze and noticed for the first time what was parked in the driveway next to the cruiser. Shiny, bright red, impossible to miss.

My motorcycle, flaunting itself in the driveway.

Marcel had said that Jack was ready to kill me, so he must know that that it was mine. There was only one person who could be behind this treachery.

'No!' I gasped. 'Why? Why would Marcel do this to me?' The sting of betrayal washed through me. I had trusted Marcel implicitly trusted him with every single secret I had. He was supposed to be the safe harbor person I could always rely on. Of course, things were strained right now, but I did not think any of the underlying foundations had changed. I did not think that was changeable!

What had I done to deserve this? Jack was going to be so mad and worse than that, he was going to be hurt and worried. Didn't he have enough to deal with already? I would have never imagined that Maggie could be so petty and only plain mean. Tears sprang, smarting, into my eyes, but they were not tearing of sadness. I had been betrayed. I was suddenly so angry that my head throbbed like it was going to explode.

'Is he still here?' I hissed.

'Yes. He's waiting for us there. 'Marcel told me, nodding toward the slender path that divided the dark fringe of the forest in two.

I jumped out of the car, launching myself toward the trees with my hands already balled into fists for the first punch.

Why did Marcel have to be so much faster than me?

He caught me around the waist before I made the path.

'Let me go! I'm going to murder him! Traitor!' I shouted the epithet toward the trees.

'Jack will hear you, 'Marcel warned me. 'And once he gets you inside, he marries brick over the doorway.'

Part: 4

Intuitively

I glanced back at the house instinctively, and it seemed like the glossy red bike was all I could see. I was seeing red. My head throbbed again.

'Just give me one round with Marcel, and then I'll deal with Jack.' I struggled futilely to break free.

'Marcel Black wants to see me. That's why he's still here.'

That stopped me cold—took the fight right out of me. My hands went limp.

They fight; Paris falls.

I was furious, but not that furious.

'Talk?' I asked.

'More or less.'

'How much more?' My voice shook.

Marcel smoothed my hair back from my face. 'Don't worry, he's not here to fight me. He's acting as... a spokesperson for the pack.'

'Oh!'

Marcel looked at the house again, then tightened his arm around my waist and pulled me toward the woods. 'We should hurry.

Jack's getting impatient.'

We did not have to go far; Marcel waited just- a short-ways up the path. He lounged against a mossy tree trunk as he waited, his face hard and bitter, exactly the way I knew it would be. He looked at me, and then at Marcel. Marcel's mouth stretched into a humorless sneer, and he shrugged away from the tree. He stood on the balls of his bare feet, leaning slightly forward, with his trembling hands clenched into fists. He looked bigger than the last time I had seen him. Somehow, impossibly, he was still growing. He would tower over Marcel if they stood next to each other.

Nonetheless, Marcel stopped as soon as we saw him, leaving a wide space between us and Marcel. Marcel turned his body, shifting me so that I was behind him. I leaned around him to stare at Marcel to accuse him with my eyes.

I would have thought that seeing his resentful, cynical expression would only make me angrier. Instead, it reminded me of the last time I had seen him, with tears in his eyes. My fury weakened, faltered, as I stared at Marcel. It had been so long since I had seen him- I hated that our reunion had to be like this.

'HEY- Girl,' Marcel said as a greeting, nodding once toward me without looking away from Marcel.

'Why?'

I whispered, trying to hide the sound of the lump in my throat.

'How could you do this to me, Marcel?'

The sneer vanished, but his face stayed hard and rigid.  
'It's for the best.'

'What is that supposed to mean? Do you want Jack to strangle me? Or did you want him to have a heart attack, like Harry? No matter how mad you are at me, how could you do this to him?'

Marcel winced, and his eyebrows pulled together, but he did not answer.

'He didn't want to hurt anyone-he just wanted to get you grounded so that you wouldn't be allowed to spend time with me,' Marcel murmured, explaining the thoughts Marcel would not say.

Marcel's eyes sparked with hate as he glowered at Marcel again.

'Awe, Maggie!' I groaned. 'I'm already grounded! Why do you think I haven't been down to La Push to kick your butt to avoid my phone calls?'

Marcel's eyes flashed back to me, confused for the first time. 'That is why?' He asked, and then locked his jaw like he was sorry he had said anything.

'He thought I wouldn't let you, not Jack,' Marcel explained again.

'Stop that,' Marcel snapped.

Marcel did not answer.

Marcel shuddered once and then gritted his teeth as hard as his fists.

'Karly wasn't exaggerating about you... abilities,' he said through his teeth. 'So-o you must already know why I'm here.'

‘Yes, ‘Marcel agreed in a soft voice. ‘On the other hand, before you begin, I need to say something.’

Marcel waited, clenching, and unclenching his hands as he tried to control the shivers rolling down his arms.

‘Thank you, ‘Marcel said, and his voice throbbed with the depth of his sincerity. ‘I will never be able to tell you how grateful I am. I will owe you for the rest of me... existence.’ Marcel stared at him blankly, his shudders stilled with surprise. He exchanged a glance with me, but my face was just as mystified.

‘For keeping Karly alive, ‘Marcel clarified, his voice rough and fervent.

‘When I... didn’t.’

‘Marcel-,’ I started to say, but he held one hand up, his eyes on Marcel.

Understanding washed over Marcel’s face before the hard mask returned. ‘I didn’t do it for your benefit.’

‘I know. But that does not erase the gratitude I feel. I thought you should know. If there’s ever anything in my power to do for you...’

Marcel raised one black brow.

Marcel shook his head. ‘That’s not in my power.’

‘Whose, then?’ Marcel growled.

Marcel looked down at me. ‘Hers. I am a quick learner, Marcel Black, and I have not made the same mistake twice. I’m here until she orders me away.’

I was immersed momentarily in his golden gaze. It was not hard to understand what I had missed in the conversation.

The only thing that Marcel would want from Marcel would be his absence.

‘Never,’ I whispered, still locked in Marcel’s eyes.

Marcel made a gagging sound.

I unwillingly broke free from Marcel’s gaze to frown at Marcel. ‘Was there something else you needed, Marcel? You wanted me in trouble-mission Accomplished.

Jack might just send me to military school.

But that will not keep me away from Marcel. There is nothing that can do that.

What more do you want?’

Marcel kept his eyes on Marcel ‘I just needed to remind your bloodsucking friends of a few key points in the treaty they agreed to.

The treaty that is the only thing stopping me from ripping his throat out right this minute.’

‘We haven’t forgotten, ‘Marcel said while I demanded, ‘What key points?’

Marcel still glowered at Marcel, but he answered me. ‘The treaty is quite specific. If any of them bite a human, the truce is over. Bite, not kill,’ he emphasized. Finally, he looked at me. His eyes were cold.

It only took me a second to grasp the distinction, and then my face was as cold as his.

‘That’s none of your business.’

‘The hell it-’ was all he managed to choke out.



I did not expect my hasty words to bring on such a strong response. Despite the warning he had come to give, he must not have known. He must have thought the warning was just a precaution. He had not realized-or did not want to believe that I had already made my choice. That I was intending to become a member of the Cullen family.

My answer sent Marcel into near convulsions. He pressed his fists hard against his temples, closing his eyes tight and curling in on himself as he tried to control the spasms. His face turned sallow green under the russet skin.

‘Maggie? You, okay?’ I asked anxiously.

I took a half-step toward him, then Marcel caught me and yanked me back behind his own body. ‘Careful! He’s not under control,’ he warned me.

But Marcel was already himself again; only his arms were shaking now. He scowled at Marcel with pure hate. ‘Ugh. I would never hurt her.’

Neither Marcel nor I missed the inflection or the accusation it had. A low hiss escaped Marcel’s lips. Marcel clenched his fists reflexively.

‘BELLA!’ Jack’s yell echoed from the direction of the house. ‘YOU GET IN THIS HOUSE THIS MOMENT!’

All of us froze, listening to the silence that followed.

I was the first to speak; my voice trembled. ‘Crap!’

Marcel’s furious expression faltered. ‘I am sorry about that,’ he muttered. ‘I had to do what I could- I had to try...’

‘Thanks.’ The tremor in my voice ruined the sarcasm. I stared up the path, half expecting Jack to come barreling

through the wet ferns like an enraged bull. I would be the red flag in that scenario.

‘Just one more thing, ‘Marcel said to me, and then he looked at Marcel. ‘We've found no trace of AVA on our side of the line-have you?’

He knew the answer as soon as Marcel thought it, but Marcel spoke the answer anyway. ‘Last time was while Karly was... away. We let her think she was slipping through-we were tightening the circle, getting ready to ambush her-’ Ice shot down my spine.

‘But then she took off like a bat out of hell. Near as we can tell, she caught your little female's scent and bailed. She hasn't come near our lands since.’

Marcel nodded. ‘When she comes back, she's not your problem anymore. We'll-’

‘She killed on our turf,’ Marcel hissed.

‘She's ours!’

‘No-,’ I began to protest both declarations.

‘BELLA! I SEE HIS CAR AND me-

KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE! IF YOU-

AREN'T INSIDE THIS HOUSE IN ONE MINUTE...!’

Jack didn't bother to end his threat.

‘Let's go, ‘Marcel said.

I looked back at Marcel, torn. Would I see him again?

‘Sorry,’ he whispered so low that I had to read his lips to understand. ‘Bye, bells.’ ‘You promised,’ I reminded him desperately. ‘Still friends, right?’

Part: 5

Capacity

Marcel shook his head slowly, and the lump in my throat nearly strangled me.

‘You know how hard I’ve tried to keep that commitment, but... I can’t see how to keep trying. Not now...’ He fought to keep his hard mask in place, but it hesitated and then disappeared. ‘Miss, you,’ he mouthed. One of his hands reached near me, his fingers outstretched like he wished they were long enough to cross the distance separating us.

‘Me, too,’ I choked out. My hand reached toward him across the wide space.

Like we were connected, the echo of his pain twisted inside me. His pain, my pain.

‘Maggie...’ I took a step toward him. I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and erase the expression of misery on his face.

Marcel pulled me back again, his arms restraining instead of defending.

‘It’s okay,’ I promised him, looking up to read his face with trust in my eyes.

He would understand...

His eyes were unreadable, his face expressionless. Cold. ‘No, it’s not.’

‘Let her go,’ Marcel growled, furious again. ‘She wants to!’ He took two long strides forward. A glimmer of apprehension flashed in his eyes. His chest seemed to enlarge as it shuddered.

Marcel pushed me behind himself, wheeling to face Marcel.

‘No! Marcel!’

‘Come on! Jack's mad!’ My voice was panicked, but not because of

Jack now. ‘Hurry!’

I tugged on him, and he relaxed a little. He pulled me back slowly, always keeping his eyes on Marcel as we retreated.

Marcel watched us with a dark scowl on his bitter face. The anticipation drained from his eyes, and then, just before the forest came between us, his face suddenly crumpled in pain.

I knew that the last glimpse of his face would haunt me until I saw him smile again.

And right there I vowed that I would see him smile, and soon. I would find a way to keep my friend.

Marcel kept his arm tight around my waist, holding me close. That was the only thing that held the tears in my eyes.

I had some serious problems.

My best friend counted me with his enemies. AVA and her girls were still on the loose, putting everyone I loved in danger. If I did not become an angel soon, the Ministry would kill me.

And now it seemed that if I did, the Ciguayo they sometimes take the shape of a sweet vampire, or wild horses would try to do the job themselves-along with trying to kill my future family. I didn't think they had any chance really, but would my best friend get himself killed in the attempt?

Therefore, these girls love to ride horses.

Profoundly serious problems in evil. So why did they all suddenly seem insignificant when we broke through the last of the trees and I caught sight of the expression on Jack's purple-blue face? Marcel squeezed me gently. 'I'm here.'

I drew in a deep breath.

That was true. Marcel was here, with his arms around me.

I could face anything if that was true.

I squared my shoulders and walked forward to meet my fate, with my destiny solidly at my side.

Part: 6

Insignia

Life... after... time, that has past... it shows the story in all colors.

Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

'Margot.'

One of the girls said, 'Well...?' No one moved.

'Go on,' whispered the girl.

They walked slowly down the hall to the sound of chilly rain. They turned through the doorway to the room at the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence.

They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out.

‘Yes, Seven.’

Then one of them gave a little cry.

‘Margot!’

‘What?’

‘She’s still in the closet where we locked her.’

‘Margot.’

They stood as if someone had driven them, like so many stakes, onto the floor. They looked at each other and then looked away. They glanced out at the world that was raining now and raining and raining steadily. They could not meet each other’s glances. Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

‘Margot.’

One of the girls said, ‘Well...?’ No one moved.

‘Go on,’ whispered the girl. They walked slowly down the hall to the sound of chilly rain. They turned through the doorway to the room at the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence. They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out none of these stories is correct, however. Panic began as so many things do in Carp, a poor town of twelve thousand people in the middle of nowhere: because it was summer, and there was nothing else to do. The rules are simple. The day after graduation is the Opening Jump, and the game goes on all through summer. After the final challenge, the winner takes the pot.

Everyone at Carp High pays into the pot, with no exceptions. Fees are a dollar a day, for every day that school is in session, from September through June. People who refuse to pony up the cash receive reminders that go from gentle to persuasive: vandalized lockers, shattered windows, shattered faces.

It's only fair, anyone who wants to play has a chance to win. That's another rule: all seniors, but only seniors, are eligible and must declare their intention to compete by participating in the Jump, the first of the difficulties.

Sometimes as many as forty kids enter.

There is only ever one winner. Two judges plan the game, name the challenges, deliver instructions, award, and deduct points. They are selected by the judges of the previous year, in strict secrecy. No one, in the whole history of Panic, has ever confessed to being one. There have been suspicions, of course rumors and speculation.

Carp is a small town, and judges get paid. How did Myra Campbell, who always stole extra lunch from the school cafeteria because there was no food at home, suddenly afford her used Honda? She said an uncle had died. But no one had ever heard of Myra's uncle-no one had ever thought about Myra, until she came rolling in with the windows down, smoking a cigarette, with the sun so bright on the windshield, it completely obscured the smile on her face. Two judges, picked in secret, sworn to secrecy, working together. It must be this way. Otherwise, they'd be subject to bribes, and to threats.

That's why there are two-to make sure that things stay stable, to diminish the possibility that one will cheat, and give out knowledge, leak hints. If the players know what to expect, then they can equip. And that isn't fair at all.

It's partly the unexpectedness, the never knowing, that starts to get to them, and weeds them out, one by one. The pot usually amounts to just over \$50,000, after fees are deducted and the judges-whomever they take their cut. Four years ago, Jimi Hareson took his winnings, bought two items out of hock, one of them a lemon-yellow Ford, drove straight to Vegas, and bet it all on black.

The next year, Lauren Davis bought herself new teeth and a new pair of tits and moved to New York City.

Come on, come to Em, hurry.

That's where the reindeer were seen?

Look at our stockings.

And there's something in them!

Look, just what I always wanted. What are they?

What do they look like? They're marbles. See, these are your Jaspers, and these are your Peeweews.

You did it all.

But...

Fooled yah, didn't I?

You!

Why are we always fighting so much?

I don't know.

That should be our New Year's revolution: to stop fighting so much.

-I'll try, but...

-But, what?



I don't know what's wrong with me when I say the things I say. I just keep on having all these strange thoughts.

What kind of thoughts?

Just thoughts...

Funny thoughts about you and me.

Tell me...

I couldn't...

They're just thoughts... They don't mean anything...  
Where did you find these?

I found them in those little shells.

They're beautiful. Thank you.

'O come, all ye faithful...' 'O small town of Bethlehem...'  
'Dashing through the snow, in a one-horse open sleigh...

'All the' Help! What's wrong? You're bleeding, aren't you? I'm all right. But you're bleeding- I say.

Go away! Don't look at me. Go away!

What was it, Em?

-Why were you bleeding like that?

-I do not know.

Liar! LI-ar!

It is true, I do not know. People do not bleed like that unless they have cut themselves. You're hurt badly, and you just do not know it.

-Let me look.

-No! I do not want you to look.

-But, why?

-Just because.

That is not fair.

I do not keep any secrets from you. I will tell you everything. Everything... what are you looking at? Your muscles... what about them? You are acting silly lately. Always saying dumb things like that. Always looking at me funny. You are not coming down with something, are you? Well, do not give it to me.

Tell me again, I said.

-Where are your mother and father?

-In heaven.

But where's heaven? You know, up there.

-Your father might be there, too.

-No, he is not.

He is coming on a ship someday to take us home.

Do you hear it? No...? Do you ever hear it? Sometimes- I think I do.

Paddy was a liar. He told us there was a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow...

...And that was a lie. He told us if we dug far enough, we would reach China. Then Santa Claus never came.

Do you ever think about him? I do... I know you do not like to talk about it, but... don't you ever wonder what

happened? I do not want to know what happened. I do... There are so many things I do not understand all of this- ah- yet.

Why? Why- do fish stop swimming and lie on top of the tide pools after it rains? Why do you hear the waves inside the big shells?

Why are all these funny hairs growing on me?

I wish a big book with all the answers to every question in the world... would drop out of the sky and land in my hand right now.

-I had read it till I knew everything.

-You cannot know everything.

Only God knows everything. God? He cannot find us any better than Santa Claus.

I wonder what fish think about? What are you doing? Trying to cheer you up. Come on, laugh.

It is not going to work... There it is again... Do you think it is the bogeyman?

It's another person. No...? Otherwise, he would have come over to meet us, and say hello. That is the proper thing to do. What if he is not nice...? What if he wants to hurt us? Then I will spear him, look! I am the greatest fisherman who ever lived.

I am the greatest fisherman who ever lived. While you scare them off, I catch as many as I want to.

That is my fish dance! It does not scare them off. It brings them up to the surface where I can spear them.

Who cares what you say? It is not how many you catch. It is how you do it. Stop that!!!

I speak!

Please play something else. Why must you do that when you know it makes me angry?

'It does not scare them away. It brings 'em to the top... '...where I can spear them.' I will spear you.

Here I am. Come back here... or I will pull your britches down and take a switch to you. Don't you dare try to spank me? I mean it. I will put never-wake-up berries in your food! I mean it. Say, 'Marcel is the smartest person

on the island.'

-Say it!

-Stop it, Marcel. I am getting angry.

-Stop it! Now get off.

-Say it!

Marcel is the smartest person on the island.

-The fastest swimmer.

-The fastest swimmer.

-The fastest runner.

-The fastest runner.

-The best hut builder.

-You're the best at everything. Now get off!

It is true... Just you wait.

You will never know when it will happen. Just one little bite and you will never wake up again.

-What is it? What happened?

-I saw him.

-Who?

-The Face Paddy thought was a bogeyman.

-Did you go to the other side?

-He's not the bogeyman.

I think he's God.

God?

He looks like Pastor Logan said he looked like: 'You'd better be good or else.' And he was bleeding.

-I do not believe you.

-Just like Jesus.

Do not go there again. It is the law.

What if he is God?

Shouldn't we go and pray? Or will he not be mad and not let us go to heaven?

I do not want to talk about it.

What is it?

I am here.

-You ate the 'dead and berries...'

-No, I am fine.

-You just had a bad dream.

-Don't ever leave me.

I promise you won't.

I promise you will always be with me.

I promise.

Don't.

What are you doing?

Go away!

Where are you going?

Wait. What is the matter?

-What are you doing?

-What do you want?

Why won't you talk to me?

Just leave me alone.

A ship, Emmeline!

The signal fire, you did not light it.

Why didn't you light it?

You know how much I want to leave.

It is the most important thing to me.

I know. First, you cry for help, then you throw sticks at me.

A ship comes, a ship! The first ship we have seen since we have been here, and you let it go by.

Well, that is it. I have had it. I am sick and tired of waiting for you to get better.

I am going to San Francisco without you. You will never build a boat strong enough to get to San Francisco.

That is the fourth time you have tried, and they've all sunk.

Shut up!

Why don't you give up?

You do not even know where San Francisco is.

You are such a silly dodo.

We are never getting off this island.

Thanks to you.

This is where we live.

This is our home, now and forever.

No!

I could never live here forever with just you.

I do not even like you.

You never used to laugh at me.

You never used to have secrets.

You are not so perfect either, Mr. Marcel.

I have seen you playing with it.

And I will tell your father if he ever gets here.

You...

I hate you...

You almost hit me... -Take back what you said.

-I have seen it all.

What happens after you do it for a long time?

Shut up! That is not fair, peeking.

-I do not peek on you.

-That's a lie.

You are always staring at my buppies'.

Only because they look so funny.

Do you know what you look like now? You look like one of those pictures Paddy had.

One of his Hoochie Coochie girls.

I do not!

Stop that, or I will never talk to you again.

See them jiggle, wiggle, and shake.

I am sorry, I did not mean to hit you.

I wish you were dead and buried.

What are you doing?

It is my hut, I built it.

That is not true. I helped you.

I did most of it.

You can find some other place to live.

I said I was sorry, Marcel.

What more do you want me to say?

I do not want you to say anything.



I do not ever want to see you again.

You just wait, Marcel.

I'll get you for this!

What's wrong with you?

Go away.

What happened?

I stepped on one of those fish that looked like a rock.

Don't go to sleep.

Oh, no. Please wake up.

God.

Take me to God.

But the law...

God...

...Please don't make Em never wake up.

I didn't mean it when I said I wanted her dead and  
buried.

I forgot most of my prayers, God...

But... Our Father... who art in heaven... kingdom come...  
with liberty and justice for all.

Amen.

Part: 7

Beach love

25- is the new 17! I can believe what I have passed up...

>said this girl here<

(I wish not to say who I am... who do you think I am?)

Em, are you all, right? I've been so worried.

You mean, you're not mad at me anymore? Of course, not... I was so scared.

All I could think of was: what if I lost my Em? What would I do? Here's some food to help you get your strength back.

Do you see that island out there?

Yes...

I've been thinking, the person who makes the drum noise... lives there and then comes here to pray. Maybe. ...It is all I have... Would you like to try to walk?

You, all right?

Yes. Kiss me... he said, looking into my love-stricken eyes... You're all gross- like I said back.

So, what? Kiss me like you always wanted too long and slow like.

HOT!

Stop it, I can't breathe. It was so-so nice- long and soft feels sweet and loving. Like a nice hug from the one you always wanted to be with... like falling into them... like falling to them... it's the melting into them that is love...

But I don't want to stop. What are you doing?

Stop it, I say to him as he feels me up there... in-between... I feel so funny in my stomach. Me, too, I am okay with this it's slutty, but what hell, I want it. His heart is beating

so fast I hear it as I am laying on him with my head on his chest. Mine, too... Come on up, keep me warm, I side upon him, and do so... while kissing him... What's the matter? I'm sorry, Blair, that it was not that long- yet was right- right? You didn't want it all day yesterday either. Don't you love me anymore? Yes, I love you more than ever, Blair. Then why don't you want to do it? It just hurts right now, that's all. When it stops hurting, we'll do it. When is that going to be? I don't understand. Why does it hurt? I don't know... why you feel so much down there... I did this before... so... so... um... maybe not, I said back I knew.

Hello, baby. Answer me, and say you love me... Tell me what to do... and I will please you as much as I can... I want to make you happy with me in all ways.

He said to me- I don't know anything. But if you touch my tummy right now, you can feel it. Feel what? How did you make your tummy move like that? I'm not doing it. It's not doing it by itself... I want you to do me... Yes, it is. There... I felt it again, his love for me. What's making it do that? I don't know... really... it feels good... so go... with it. What's wrong with what I am doing? Nothing- Did I hurt you- go too hard?

Look, I think he's hungry, with that look on his face... it was love... for me... What did they look like?

I don't want to talk about it. I don't know why I feel this way about you... I just do...

If they come, I'll do to them what I do to the fish.

I'll stick it in their eyes! I'll stick it through their bellies and watch their guts come out! Remember on the ship when we tried to get to the dinghy...

...How the men pushed and shoved each other?

How did their eyes look?

Look at all the Water blue-green whooshing. It was the same with the drum people.

I do not understand. Why do people have to be so bad to each other? I am busy keeping watch. Come here, hurry. Come on, you must see this. You taught him to swim. around the tree, there was a boat, that we used for our fun-we had this loved spot all to ourselves- the lost beach- where we went to have what was so wrong to them. Look at the bird. Look, Priced-Day.

Do you see some fish? What do you see? We are out there, we are now in the water naked- looking at all the things in the sea, do you see that ship? Big- I said. Blair.

Yes? He said my name. As we rain back up on the lost lovers' beach, we are making footprints- being playful with each other. Remember the snowball fights we had every time it snowed? We say together- side by side and tight... it is freezing no... I remember that... look at us now... It was cold.

I love you...

~\*~

I want to see it again... and- over and- over-and-over. What are you doing? Get those out of your mouth. she swallowed some.

Come here.

Do not close your eyes...Please do not go to sleep. Please.

(Fade)

I thought you were afraid. If not being with me- take me there? Sure. I go there for bananas, myself... not getting along... at all at this point. Are you coming?

The next day in the hut- they made- it was part of the fun of doing this they said. Can we go closer to me, jezz? Sorry- let us go- were now out- I will see the moonlight, swimming now with her over a careful reef. Look at that face, it was a thought I had. The blue boat was overhead.

I cannot stop this, yet we are drifting, for the boat... Look how far out we are! Shark! Look... When it hits the water, you can hear it hiss. Look, see? Hear it?

-Where did you get those?

-Get those out of your mouth.

I cannot make it out...

Swim... swim...

And we did...

Not by much, we made it out...

Remember me Shy-?

I got what I wanted too... Thanks, Jenny for being a d\*ck, it took this long for your shit to stop- and get I boy to love me. ROT IN HELL!

B\*TCH!

This was always where the girl came with their guys back in the day... the cove... next to the falls...

Part 8

Anecdotes

(Cut)

She recovered to Carp two Christmases later, stayed just long enough to show off a new purse and an even newer

nose, and then blew back downtown. Hearsays floated back: she was dating the producer of some reality TV weight-loss show; she was becoming AVA's Secret model, though no one had ever seen her in a catalog. (And many of the boys have seen.)

Conrad Spurlock went into the manufacture of methamphetamines-his father's line of business-and poured the money into a new shed on Mallory Road, after their last place burned straight to the ground.

But Sean McManus used the money to go to college; he is thinking of becoming a doctor. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a rainy world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

In seven years of playing, there have been three deaths-four including Jimi Hareson, who shot himself with the second thing he had bought at the pawnshop after his number came up red.

Do you see it? Even the winner of Panic is afraid of something. So: back to the day after graduation, the opening day of Panic, the day of the Jump. Rewind to the beach but pause a few hours before Maggie stood on the ridge, suddenly petrified, afraid to jump.

Turn the camera slightly. We're not quite there. Almost, though. Marcel NO ONE ON THE BEACH WAS CHEERING

FOR Marcel Mason-no one would cheer for him either, no matter how far he got.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was the win. And Marcel had a secret-he knew something about Panic, knew

more about it, probably than any of the other people on the beach.

He had two secrets. Marcel liked secrets... They fueled him, gave him a sense of power. When he was little, he'd even fantasized that he had his secret world, a private place of shadows, where he could curl up and hide.

Even now-on Dayna's bad days, when the pain came roaring back and she started to cry, when his mom hosed the place down with Fiberize and invited over her newest Piece of Shit date, and late at night Marcel could hear the bed frame hitting the wall, like a punch in the stomach every time he thought about sinking into that dark space, cool and private.

Everyone at school thought Marcel was a pussy. He knew that.

He looked like a pussy. He'd always been tall and skinny-angles and corners, his mom said, just like his father. As far as he knew, the angles-and the dark skin- were the only things he had in common with his dad, a Dominican roofer his mom had been with for one hot second back in Miami. Marcel could never even remember his name... Roberto. Or Rodrigo... Some shit like that.

Back when they'd first gotten stuck in Carp (that's how he always thought about it getting stuck-he, Dayna, and his mom was just like empty plastic bags skipping across the country on fitful bits of wind, occasionally getting snagged around a telephone pole or under the tires of some semi, pinned in place for a bit), he'd been beaten up three times: once by Greg O'Hare, then by Zavic Keller, and then by Greg O'Hare again, just to make sure that Marcel knew the rules. And Marcel hadn't swung back, not once.

He'd had worse before. Besides that, it was Marcel's second secret and the source of his power. He wasn't afraid. He just didn't care, and that was very, very different.

The sky was streaked with red and purple and orange. It reminded Marcel of an enormous bruise, or a picture taken of the inside of a body. It was still an hour or so before sunset and before the pot, and then the Jump would be announced.

Marcel cracked a beer. His first and only. He didn't want to be buzzed and didn't need to be either.

But it had been a sweltering day, and he'd come straight from Home Depot, and he was thirsty. The crowd had only just started to assemble. Periodically, Marcel- heard the muffled slamming of a car door, a shout of greeting from the woods, the distant blare of music.

Whippoorwill Road was a quarter mile away; kids were just starting to emerge from the path, fighting their way through the thick underbrush, swatting away hanging moss and creeper vines, carting coolers and blankets, and bottles and iPod speakers, staking out patches of sand. The school was done for good, forever. He took a deep breath. Of all the places he had lived- New Orleans-New York, Chicago, DC, Dallas, Richmond, Ohio, Rhode Island, Oklahoma, smelled the best. Like growth and change, things turning over, and becoming other things. Ray Hanrahan and his friends had arrived first. That was unsurprising.

Even though competitors weren't officially announced until the moment of the Jump, Ray had been bragging for months that he was going to take home the pot, just like his brother had two years earlier. Luke had won, just barely, in the last round of Panic. Luke had walked away with fifty- grand. The other driver hadn't walked away at all. If the doctors were right, she'd never walk again. Marcel flipped a coin in his palm, made



it disappear, then reappear easily between his fingers. In fourth grade, his mom's boyfriend couldn't remember which one had bought him a book about magic tricks.

They'd been living in Oklahoma that year, a shithole in a flat bowl in the middle of the country, where the sun singed the ground to dirt and the grass to gray, and he'd spent a whole summer teaching himself how to pull coins from someone's ear and slip a card into his pocket so quickly, it was unnoticeable. It had started as a way to pass the time but had become a kind of obsession. There was something elegant about it: how people saw without seeing, how the mind fills in what is expected, how the eyes betrayed you.

Terror, he knew, was one big magic trick. The judges were the magicians; the rest of them were just a dumb, gaping audience.

Part: 9

Lifeguard Chair

Mike Dickinson came next, along with two friends, all of them visibly drunk. The D\*ck's hair had started to thin, and patches of his scalp were visible when he bent down to deposit his cooler on the beach. His friends were carrying a half-rotted lifeguard chair between them: the throne, where Diggin, the announcer, would sit during the event. Marcel heard a high whine. He smacked unthinkingly, catching the mosquito just as it started to feed, smearing a bit of black on his bare calf. He hated mosquitoes. Spiders, too, although he liked other insects, found them fascinating. Like humans, in a way -stupid and sometimes vicious, blinded by need.

The sky was deepening; the light was fading and so were the colors, swirling away behind the line of trees beyond the ridge, as though someone had pulled the plug. Maggie Nill

was next on the beach, followed by Nat Velez, and lastly, Bishop Marks, trotting happily after them like an overgrown sheepdog. Even from a distance, Marcel could tell both girls were on edge. Maggie had done something with her hair. He wasn't sure what, but it wasn't wrestled into its usual ponytail, and it even looked like she might have straightened it. And he wasn't sure, but he thought she might be wearing makeup.

He debated getting up and going over to say hi. Maggie was cool. He liked how tall she was, how tough, too, in her way. He liked her broad shoulders and the way she walked, straight-backed, even though he was sure she would have liked to be a few inches shorter could tell from the way she wore only flats and sneakers with worn down soles.

But if he got up, he'd have to talk to Natalie-and even looking at Nat from across the beach made his stomach seize up like he'd been kicked. Nat wasn't exactly mean to him-not like some of the other kids at, school but she wasn't exactly nice, either, or that bothered him more than anything else. She usually smiled vaguely when she caught him talking to Maggie, and as her eyes skated past him, through him, he knew that she would never, ever, actually look at him. Once, at the homecoming bonfire last year, she'd even called him Dave.

He'd gone just because he was hoping to see her. And then, in the crowd, he had spotted her; had moved toward her, buzzed by the noise and the heat and the shot of whiskey he'd taken in the parking lot, intending to talk to her, really talk to her, for the first time. Just as he was reaching out to touch her elbow, she had taken a step backward, onto his foot.

'Oops! Sorry, Dave,' she'd said, giggling.

Her breath smelled like vanilla and vodka. And his stomach had opened up, and his guts went straight onto his shoes. There were only

107 people in their graduating class, out of the 150 who'd started at Carp High freshman year. And she didn't even know his name. So, he stayed where he was, working his toes into the ground, waiting for the dark, waiting for the whistle to blow and for the games to begin. He was going to beat Terror. He was going to do it for Dayna. He was going to do it for revenge.

Maggie 'TESTING, TESTING. ONE, TWO, -THREE.' THAT WAS DIGGING, testing the megaphone. The old quarry off Whippoorwill Road, empty since the late 1800s, had been flooded in the fifties to make a swimming hole. On the south side was the beach: a narrow strip of sand and stone, supposedly off-limits after dark, but rarely used before then; a dump of cigarette butts, crushed beer cans, empty Baggies, and sometimes, disgustingly, condoms, scattered limply on the ground like tubular jellyfish.

Tonight, it was crowded-packed with blankets and beach chairs, heavy with the smell of mosquito repellent and booze.

Maggie closed her eyes and inhaled. This was the smell of Panic- the smell of summer. At the edge of the water, there was an explosion of color and sound, shrieks of laughter. Firecrackers. In the quick glare of red and green light, Maggie saw Kaitlin Frost and Shayna Lambert laughing, doubled over, while Patrick Culbert tried to get a few more flares to light. It was weird. Graduation had been only yesterday- Maggie had bailed on the ceremony, since Krista, her mom, wouldn't show, and there was no point in pretending there was some big glory in floating through four years of mandated classes. But already she felt years and years away from high school like it had all been one long, unmemorable dream.

She thought that it was because people didn't change. All the days had simply blurred together and would now be suctioned away into the past. Nothing ever happened in Carp. There were no surprises. Digging's voice echoed through the crowd.

Part: 10

Hollered

'Welcome to the second challenge,' Digging boomed out.

'Suck it, Rodgers,' a guy yelled, and there were whoops and scattered laughs.

Someone else said, 'Sh-h.' Digging pretended he had not heard:

'This is a test of bravery and balance-'

'And sobriety!'

'Dude, I'm going to fall.'

More laughter. Maggie could not even smile. Next to her, Natalie was fidgeting, turning to the right and left, touching her hip bones. Maggie could not even ask what she was doing.

Digging kept plowing on: 'A test of speed, too, since all the contestants will be timed-'

'Jesus, get on with it.' Digging finally lost it. He wrenched the megaphone from his mouth. 'Shut the hell up, Lee.' This provoked a new round of laughter. To Maggie, it all felt like she was watching a movie and the sound was a few seconds too late.

She couldn't stop herself from looking up now-at that single beam, a few bare inches of wood, stretched fifty feet

above the ground. The Jump was a tradition, more for fun than for anything else, a plunge into the water. This would be a plunge to the hard earth, packed ground. No chance of surviving it.

There was a momentary stutter when the truck engine gave out, and everything went dark. There were shouts of protest; and when, a few seconds later, the engine gunned on-again, Maggie saw Matt: standing in the beam of the headlights, laughing, one hand in the back of Delaney's jeans. Her stomach rolled over. Weirdly, it was that fact-the way he had his hand shoved up against her butt-more than even seeing them together, that made her sick. He had never once touched her in that way, had even complained that couples who stood like that, hand-to-but, should be shot.

Maybe he'd thought she wasn't cute enough. Maybe he'd been embarrassed by her. Maybe he had just been lying then, to spare her feelings.

Maybe she'd never really known him.

This thought struck her with terror.

If she didn't know Joel Flores- the boy who'd once applauded after she burped the alphabet, who'd even, once, noticed that she had a little period blood on the outside of her white shorts and not made a big deal of it, and pretended not to be grossed out-then she couldn't count on knowing any of these people, or what they were capable of.

Suddenly she was aware of stillness, a pause in the flow of laughter and conversation, as though everyone had drawn breath at once. And she realized that Kim Hollister was inching out onto the plank, high above their heads, her face stark-white and terrified and that the challenge had started. It took Kim

forty-seven seconds to inch her way across, shuffling, keeping her right foot always in front of her left.

When she reached the second water tower safely, she briefly embraced it with both arms, and the crowd exhaled as one.

Then came Fred Harte: he made it even faster, taking the short, clipped steps of a tightrope walker. And then Merl Tracey. Even before he'd crossed to safety, Digging lifted the megaphone and trumpeted the next name. 'Maggie Nill! Maggie Nill, to the stage!'

'Good luck, Heath- bar,' Natalie said.

'Don't look down.'

'Thanks,' Maggie said automatically, even as she registered it as ridiculous advice.

When you're fifty feet in the air, where else do you look but down?

She felt as though she were moving in silence, although she knew, too, that that was unlikely-Digging couldn't keep his mouth off that stupid megaphone for anything. It was just because she was afraid; afraid and still thinking, stupidly, miserably, about Matt, and wondering whether he was watching her with his hand still shoved down the back of Delaney's pants.

As she began to climb the ladder that ran up one leg of the eastern water tower, her fingers numb on the cold, slick metal, it occurred to her that he would be staring at her butt, and feeling Delaney's butt, and that was sick.

Then it occurred to her that everyone could see her butt, and she had a moment of panic, wondering if her

underwear lines were visible through her jeans, since she just could not stomach thongs and did not understand girls who could. She was already halfway up the ladder by then, and it further occurred to her that if she were stressing so hard about underwear lines, she could not truly be afraid of the height.

For the first time, she began to feel more confident. But the rain was a problem. It made the rungs of the ladder slick under her fingers. It blurred her vision and made the treads of her sneakers slip. When she finally reached the small metal ledge that ran along the circumference of the water tank and hauled herself to her feet, the fear came swinging back.

There was nothing to hold on to, only smooth, wet metal behind her back, and air omnipresent. Only a few inches difference between being alive and not. A tingle worked its way from her feet to her legs and up into her palms, and for a second, she was worried not of falling but of jumping, springing out into the mysterious air.

She shuffled sideways toward the wooden beam, pressing her back as hard as she could against the tank, praying that from below she did not look as frightened as she felt. Crying out, hesitating-it would all be counted against her.

‘Time!’

Digging’s voice boomed out from below. Maggie knew she had to move if she wanted to stay in the game. Maggie forced herself away from the tank and inched forward onto the wooden plank, which had been barely secured to the ledge utilizing several twisted screws. She had a sudden image of wood snapping under her weight, a wild hurtle through space. But the wood held.

She raised her arms unconsciously for balance, no longer thinking of Matt or Delaney or Joh Joh staring up at her,

or anything other than all that thin air, the horrible prickling in her feet and legs, an itch to jump.

She could move faster if she paced normally, one foot in front of the other, but she could not bring herself to break contact with the board; if she lifted a foot, a heel, a toe, she would collapse, she would swing to one side and die.

She was conscious of deep silence, a quiet so heavy she could hear the fizz of the rain, could hear her breathing, shallow, and quick. Beneath her was blinding light, the kind of light you would see just before you died.

All the people had merged with shadow, and for a second, she was afraid she had died, that she was all alone on a tiny, bare surface, with an endless fall into the dark on either side of her. Inch by inch, going as fast as she could without lifting her feet.

And then, all at once, she was done -she had reached the second water tower and found herself hugging the tank, like Kim had done, pressing flat against it, letting her sweatshirt get soaked. A cheer went up, even as another name was announced: Ray Hanrahan.

Her head was ringing, and her mouth was perceived like alloy. Over. It was over. Her arms felt suddenly useless, her flesh weak with relief, as she made her way stumblingly down the ladder, dropping the last few feet and taking two stumbling steps before righting herself. Souls reached out, hugged her shoulders, patted her on the back. She did not know if she grinned or not.

‘You were amazing!’ Nat barreled to her through the crowd. Maggie barely registered the feel of Nat’s arms around her neck. ‘Is it scary? Where you freaked?’



Maggie shook her head, conscious of people still watching her. 'It went quick,' she said. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she felt better. It was over. She was standing in the middle of a crowd: the air smelled like damp fleece and cigarette smoke.

Solid- Real!

'Forty-two seconds,' Nat said proudly. Maggie had not even heard her time be announced.

'Where's Joh Joh?' Maggie asked. Now she was starting to feel good. A bubbly feeling was working its way through her. Forty-two seconds. Not bad.

'He was right behind me...' Nat turned to scan the crowd, but the truck's headlights turned everyone into silhouettes, dark brushstroke people. Another cheer erupted.

Maggie looked up and saw that Ray had crossed already. Digging's voice echoed out hollowly: 'Twenty-two seconds! A record so far!'

Maggie swallowed back a sour taste. She hated Ray Hanrahan. In seventh grade, when she still had not developed boobs, he stuck a training bra to the outside of her locker and spread a rumor that she was taking medicine to turn into a boy. 'Got any chin hairs yet?' he would say when he passed her in the halls. He only left her alone once Joh Joh threatened to tell the police officers that Luke Hanrahan was selling weed from Pepe's, where he worked, slipping bags of pot under the slice if patrons asked for 'extra oregano.' Which he was.

It was Zavic Keller's turn next.

Part: 11

Root For

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I have an announcement: the school’s out for summer.’ Everyone cheered... There was a not pop- pop- pop, a burst of firecrackers. They were in the middle of the woods, five miles from the nearest house. They could make all the noise they wanted. They could shout. They could scream. No one would hear them.

Maggie’s stomach seized up. It was starting. She knew Nat must be freaking out. She knew she should say something encouraging to her-Maggie and Bishop were there for Natalie, to give her moral support. Bishop had even made a poster: Go, Nat, he had written. Next, to the words, he had drawn a huge stick figure -Natalie could tell it was supposed to be here because the stick figure was wearing a pink sweatshirt-standing on a pile of money.

‘How come Nat’s not wearing any pants?’ Maggie had asked.

‘Maybe she lost them during the Jump,’ Bishop said. He turned, grinning, to Nat. Whenever he smiled like that, his eyes went from syrup brown to honey-colored. ‘Drawing was never my thing.’

Maggie did not like to talk about Matt in front of Bishop. She could not stand the way he rolled his eyes when she brought him up as she had just switched the radio to a bad pop station.

But finally, she could not help it. ‘He’s still not here.’ Maggie spoke in a deep voice, so only Nat would hear her.

‘Sorry, Nat. I know this is not the time- I mean; we came for you-’

‘It’s okay.’ Nat reached out and squeezed Maggie’s hand with both of her own. She pulled a weird face as if

someone had just made her chug a limeade. 'Look. Matt does not deserve you. Okay? You can do better than Matt.'

Maggie half laughed. 'You're my best friend, Nat,' she said. 'You aren't supposed to lie to me.' Nat shook her head. 'I am sure he will be here soon. The game's about to start.' Maggie checked her phone again, for the millionth time. Nothing. She had powered it down several times and rebooted it, just to make sure it was working.

Digging's voice boomed out again:

'The rules of Panic are simple. Anyone can enter. But only one person will win.'

Digging announced the pot.

\$67,000.

Maggie felt as though she had been punched in the stomach. \$67,000. That had to be the biggest pot ever. The crowd began to buzz-the number ran through them like an electric current, jumping from lip to lip. Shit, man, you would have to be crazy not to play. Nat looked as though she had just taken a large spoonful of ice cream.

Digging plunged on, ignoring the noise. He announced the rules-a half-dozen events, spaced throughout the summer, conducted under conditions of strictest privacy; eliminations after every round; individual challenges for each contestant who made it past the halfway, mark-but nobody was listening. It was the same speech as always. Maggie had been watching Panic since she was in eighth grade.

She could have made the speech herself.

That number-67,000-wrapped itself around her heart and squeezed. Without meaning to, she thought of all she could

do with the money; she thought of how far she could go, what she could buy, how long she could live. How many miles away from Carp she could get.

But no. She could not leave Matt. Matt had said he loved her. He was her plan. The grip on her heart eased a little, and she found she could breathe again. Next, to Maggie, Natalie shimmied out of her jean shorts and kicked off her shoes. 'Can you believe it?' she said. She took off her shirt, shivering in the wind. Maggie could not believe she had insisted on that ridiculous bikini, which would fly off as soon as she hit the water. Natalie had only laughed. She'd joked that it would earn her extra points.

That was Natalie: stubborn. Vain, too. Maggie still could not understand why she had even chosen to play. Nat was afraid of everything.

Someone-Billy Wallace- whistled. 'Nice ass, Velez.' Nat ignored him, but Maggie could tell she had heard and was pretending not to be pleased.

Maggie wondered what Billy Wallace would say if she tried to wear a scrap of fabric like that on her butt. Whoa. Look at the size of that thing! Do you need a permit to carry that thing around, Maggie? But Matt loved her. Matt thought she was pretty. The noise on the beach swelled, grew to a roar: hoots and screams, people waving homemade banners and flags, firecrackers exploding like a smattering of gunfire, and she knew it was time. The whistle would blow.

Terror was about to begin. Just then Maggie saw him. The crowd parted temporarily; she could see him, smiling, talking to someone; then the crowd shifted again, and she lost sight of him. 'He is here. Nat, he is here.' 'What?' Nat was not paying attention anymore.

Maggie's voice dried up in her throat. Because the crowd had opened again, just as she had started moving toward him, as though directed by gravity-relief welling in her chest, a chance to make things right, a chance to do things right, for once-and in that second, she had seen that he was speaking to Delaney O'Brien.

Not just speaking. Whispering...

And then: kissing. The whistle blew sharp and thin in the sudden silence, like the cry of an alien bird.

Maggie reached the top of the ridge just as Derek Klieg got a running start and hurled himself into the air, body contorted, shouting.

A few seconds later, a cheer went up as he hit. Natalie was crouching a few feet away from the edge, her face pale; for a second,

Maggie thought she heard her counting. Then Nat turned and blinked repeatedly, as though trying to bring Maggie's face into focus. She opened her mouth and closed it again.

Maggie's heart was beating hard and high. 'Hey, Nat,' she said, just as Natalie straightened up.

'What the hell are you doing?' Natalie spat out. Now Maggie registered everything, all at once: the ache in her hands and thighs, the pain in her fingers, the sharp bite of the wind. Natalie looked furious. She was shaking, although that might have been the cold.

'I'm going to jump,' Maggie said, realizing, as she said it, how stupid it sounded how stupid it was. Suddenly, she thought she might puke.

I will be cheering for you; Maggie said to Natalie. The guilt was there, throbbing alongside nausea. But Matt's voice was bigger than anything.

Matt's voice, and underneath it a vision of the water stains above her bed; the dull thud of music from the park; the smell of weed and cigarettes; the sounds of laughing, and later, someone screaming, you are a dumb piece of... Shit! 'You can't jump,' Nat said, still staring. 'I'm jumping.'

'We'll jump together,' Maggie said.

Natalie took two steps forward. Maggie noticed she was balling her fists rhythmically. Squeeze, relax.

Squeeze, relax. Three times.

'Why are you doing this?' The question was a whisper.

Maggie could not answer. She did not even know, not exactly. All she knew-all she could feel was that this was her last chance.

So-o she just said, 'I am going to jump now. Before I chicken out.'

When she turned toward the water, Natalie reached for Maggie, as if to pull her back. But she didn't.

Maggie felt as though the rock underneath her had begun to move, bucking like a horse. She had a sudden terror that she was going to lose her balance and go tumbling down the rocky slope, cracking her head in the shallows.

Fear. She took small, halting steps forward, and still reached the edge far too quickly.

'Announce yourself!' Digging boomed out. Below Maggie, the water, black as oil, was still churning with bodies.

She wanted to shout down-move, move, I am going to hit you- but she could not speak. She could hardly breathe. Her lungs felt like they were being pressed between two stones.

And suddenly she could not think of anything but Chris Heinz, who five years ago drank a fifth of vodka before doing the jump and lost his footing. The sound his head made as it cracked against the rock was delicate, like an egg breaking. She remembered the way everyone ran through the woods; the image of his body, broken and limp, lying half-submerged in the water.

‘Say your name!’ Digging prompted again, and the crowd picked up the chant: Name, name, name.

She opened her mouth. ‘Maggie,’ she croaked out. ‘Maggie Nill.’ Her voice broke, got whipped back by the wind.

The chant was still going Name, name, name. Then: Jump, jump, jump, jump.

Her insides were white; filled with snow. Her mouth tasted a little like vomit. She took a deep breath. She closed her eyes.

She jumped.

Part: 12

SATURDAY, JUNE 25

~Maggie~

MAGGIE HAD ONCE READ AN ARTICLE ONLINE ABOUT how time was

relative and moved faster or slower depending on where you were and what you were doing. But she had never understood why it moved slower during the awful stuff-math

class, dentist appointments-and speeded up whenever you tried to make time go slow. Like when you were taking a test, or at your birthday party.

Or, in this case, dreading something.

Why? Why- did time have to be the wrong relative? She had never regretted anything as much as she regretted making the decision, on the beach, to enter the game. In the days that followed, it seemed to her like a kind of insanity. She had inhaled too much alcohol vapor on the beach. Maybe seeing Matt with Delaney had driven her temporarily psychotic.

That happened, didn't it? Weren't whole defenses built on that, when people went crazy and hacked their ex-wives to pieces with an ax? But she was too proud to withdraw now. And the date of the first official challenge kept drawing nearer. Even though the breakup made her want to go into permanent hiding, although she was doing her best to avoid everyone who knew her even vaguely, the news had reached her: the water towers near Copake had been defaced, painted over with a date. Saturday. Sundown.

A message and invitation to all the players.

Matt was gone. School is over.

Not that she had ever liked school, but still. It got her out of the house; it was something to do. Now everything was over and done. It occurred to her that this was her life: vast and empty, like a coin dropping down a bottomless well. She moved as slowly as she could, spent her nights curled on the couch watching TV with her sister, Lily, turned off her phone when she was not obsessively checking it for calls from

Matt...



She did not want to deal with Bishop, who would lecture her and tell her that Matt was an idiot anyway; and Nat spent three days giving her the cold shoulder before admitting, finally, that she was not that mad anymore. Time tumbled, cascaded on, as though life had been set too fast-forward. Finally, Saturday came, and she could not avoid it anymore.

She did not even have to bother to sneak out. Earlier in the evening, her mom and her stepdad, Bo, had gone over to some bar in Ancram, which meant they would not be stumbling home until the early hours of Sunday afternoon-bleary-eyed, reeking of smoke, starving and in a foul mood. Maggie made mac 'n' cheese for Lily, who ate in sullen silence in front of the TV. Lily's hair was parted exactly down the middle, combed straight, and fixed in a hard knot at the back of her head. Recently she had been wearing it like that, and it made her look like an old woman stuck in an eleven-year-old body.

Lily was giving her the silent treatment, and Maggie did not know why, but she did not have enough energy to worry about it. Lily was like that: stormy one minute, smiley the next. Recently, she had been more on the stormy side- more serious, too, incredibly careful about what she wore and how she fixed her hair, quieter, less likely to laugh until she snorted milk, less likely to beg Maggie for a story before she went to bed-but Maggie figured she was just growing up. There was not that much to smile about in Carp. There was not much to smile about in Fresh Pines Mobile Park.

Still, it made Maggie's chest ache a little. She missed the old Lily: sticky Dr. Pepper hands, the smell of the bubblegum breath, hair that was never combed, and glasses that were always smudgy. She missed Lily's eyes, wide in the dark, as she rolled over and whispered, 'Tell me a story, Maggie.' But that was the way it worked- evolution, she guessed; the order of

things. At seven-thirty p.m., Bishop texted her to say that he was on his way.

Lily had withdrawn to the Corner, which was what Maggie called their bedroom: a narrow, cramped room with two beds squeezed side by side; a chest of drawers missing a leg, which rocked violently when it was opened; a chipped lamp and a varnish-spotted nightstand; clothes heaped everywhere, like snowdrifts. Lily was lying in the dark, blankets drawn up to her chin.

Maggie assumed she was sleeping and was about to close the door, when Lily turned to her, sitting up on one elbow. In the moonlight coming through the dirty windowpane, her eyes were like polished marbles.

‘Where are you going?’ She spoke. Maggie navigated around a tangle of jeans and sweatshirts, underwear, and balled-up socks.

She sat down on Lily’s bed. She was glad that Lily was not asleep. She was glad, too, that Lily had decided to talk to her.

‘Bishop and Nat are picking me up,’ she said, avoiding the question. ‘We’re going to hang out for a little while.’

Lily lay down again, huddling in her blankets. For a minute, she did not say anything. Then: ‘Are you coming back?’ Maggie felt her chest squeeze up.

She leaned over to place a hand on Lily’s head. Lily jerked away. ‘Why would you say something like that, billy-goat?’

Lily did not answer. For several minutes Maggie sat there, her heart racing in her chest, feeling helpless and alone in the dark. Then she heard Lily’s breathing and knew she had

fallen asleep. Maggie leaned over and kissed her sister's head. Lily's skin was hot and wet, and Maggie had the urge to climb into bed with her, to wake her up and apologize for everything: for the ants in the kitchen and the water stains on the ceiling; for the smells of smoke and the shouting from outside; for their mom, Krista, and their stepdad, Bo; for the pathetic life they had been thrust into, narrow as a tin can. But she heard a light honk from outside, so instead, she got up, closing the door behind her.

Maggie could always tell Bishop was coming by the sound of his cars. His dad had owned a garage once, and John John was a car freak. He was good at building things; several years ago, he had made Maggie arise out of petals of copper, with a steel stem and little screws for thorns.

He was always tinkering with rusted pieces of junk he picked up from God-knows-were. His newest was a Le Sabre with an engine that sounded like an old man trying to choke out a belt buckle. Maggie took the shotgun. Natalie was sitting in the back. Weirdly, Natalie always insisted on sitting b\*tch, in the exact middle, even if there was no one else in the car. She had told Maggie that she did not like picking sides-left or right-because it always felt like she was betting on her life. Maggie had explained to her a million times that it was more dangerous to sit in the middle, but Nat did not listen. 'I can't believe you roped me into this,' John John said when Maggie got in the car. It was raining the kind of rain that did not so much fall as materialize, as though it was being exhaled by a giant mouth. There was no point in using an umbrella or rain jacket-it was coming from all directions at once and got in collars and under shirtsleeves and down the back.

Part: 13

Failsafe

‘Please...’ She cinched her hoodie a bit tighter. ‘Cut the holier-than-thou crap. You have always watched the game.’

‘Yeah, but that was before my two best friends decided to go bat-shit and join.’

‘We get it, Joh-John,’ Nat said. ‘Turn on some music, will you?’

‘No can do, my lady.’ Joh-John reached into the cup holder and handed Maggie a Slurpee from 7-Eleven. Blue. Her favorite. She took a sip and felt a good freeze in her head. ‘Radios busted. I am doing some work on the wiring-’ Nat cut him off, groaning exaggeratedly. ‘Not again.’

‘What can I say? I love fixer-uppers.’ He patted the steering wheel as he accelerated onto the highway. As if in response, the Le Sabre made a shrill whine of protest, followed by several emphatic bangs and a horrifying rattle, as if the engine were coming apart.

‘I’m pretty sure the love is not mutual,’ Nat said, and Maggie laughed, and felt a little less nervous. As Joh- John angled the car off the road and bumped into the narrow, packed-dirt one-liner that ran the periphery of the park, NO TRESPASSING signs were lit up intermittently amid his headlights.

Already, a few dozen cars were parked on the lane, most of them squeezed as close to the woods as possible, some entirely swallowed by the underbrush.

Maggie spotted Matt’s car right away-the old used Jeep he had inherited from an uncle, its rear bumper plastered with half-shredded stickers he had tried desperately to key off, as though he had backed up into a massive spider web. She remembered the first time they had ever driven around

together, to celebrate the fact that he had finally gotten his license after failing the test three times. He had stopped and started so abruptly she had felt like she might vomit up the doughnuts he had bought her, but he was so happy, she was happy too.

All day, all week, she had been both desperately hoping to see him and praying that she would never see him again.

If Delaney were here, she really would vomit. She should not have had the Slurpee.

‘You, okay?’ Joh Joh asked her in a deep voice as they got out of the car. He could always read her: she loved and hated that about him at the same time.

‘I’m fine,’ she said, too sharply.

‘Why’d you do it, Maggie?’ he said, putting a hand on her elbow and stopping her. ‘Why’d you, do it?’ Maggie noticed he was wearing the same outfit he had been wearing the last time she had seen him, on the beach- the faded-blue Lucky Charms T-shirt, the jeans so long they looped underneath the heels of his Converse-and felt vaguely annoyed by it. His dirty-blond hair was sticking out at crazy angles underneath his ancient Pittsburgh- hat. He smelled good, though, a very Joh Joh smell: like the inside of a drawer full of old coins and Tic Tacs.

For a second, she thought of telling him the truth: that when Matt had dumped her, she had understood for the first time that she was a complete and total nobody.

But then he ruined it. ‘Please tell me this isn’t about Matthew Haipley,’ he said.

There it was. The eye- roll.

‘Come on, Joh Joh.’ She could have hit him. Even hearing the name made her throat squeeze up into a knot.

‘Give me a reason, then. You said to yourself, a million times, that Panic is stupid.’ ‘Nat entered, didn’t she? How come you are not lecturing her?’

‘Nat’s an idiot,’ Joh Joh said. He took off his hat and rubbed his head, and his hair responded as though it had been electrified, and it promptly stood straight up. Joh Joh claimed that his superpower was electromagnetic hair; Maggie’s only superpower was the amazing ability to have one angry red pimple at any given time.

‘She’s one of your best friends,’ Maggie pointed out.

‘So? She is still an idiot. I have an open-door idiot policy on friendship.’

Maggie could not help it; she laughed. Joh Joh smiled too, so wide she could see the small overlap in his two front teeth.

Joh Joh shoved on his baseball hat again, smothering the disaster of his hair. He was one of the few boys she knew who was taller than she was even Matt had been exactly her height, five-eleven. Sometimes she was grateful; sometimes she resented him for it like he was trying to prove a point by being taller.

Up until the time they were twelve years old, they had been the same height, to the centimeter. In Joh Joh’s bedroom was a ladder of old pencil marks on the wall to prove it.

‘I’m betting on you, Nill,’ he said in a deep voice. ‘I want you to know that. I do not want you to play. It is idiotic. But I am betting on you.’ He put an arm over her shoulder and squeezed her, and something in his tone of voice reminded her that once-

ages and ages ago, it felt like she had been briefly head-over-heels in love with him.

Freshman year, they had had one fumbling kiss in the back of the Hudson Movie- Plex, even though she had had popcorn stuck in her teeth, and for two days they had held hands loosely, suddenly incapable of the conversation even though they had been friends since elementary school. And then he had broken it off, and Maggie had said she understood, even though she did not. She did not know what made her think of it.

She could not imagine being in love with Joh Joh now. He was like a brother-an annoying brother who always felt the need to point out when you had a pimple. Which you did, always. But just one. Already, she could hear faint music through the trees, and the crackle and boom of Digging's voice, amplified by the megaphone.

The water towers scrawled with graffiti and imprinted faintly with the words Allegheny- counties, lit starkly from below. Perched on rail-thin legs, they looked like overgrown insects. No like a single insect, with two rounded steel joints. Because Maggie could see, even from a distance, that a narrow wooden plank had been set between them, fifty feet in the air.

The challenge, this time, was clear.

By the time, Maggie, Nat, and Joh Joh had arrived at the place where the crowd was assembled, directly under the towers, her face was slick. As usual, the atmosphere was celebratory- the crowd was keyed up, anxious, although everyone was speaking in whispers.

Someone had managed to maneuver a truck through the woods. A floodlight, hooked to its engine, illuminated the towers and the single wooden plank running between them and

lit up the mist of rain. Cigarettes flared intermittently, and the truck radio was playing old rock songs thudded quietly under the rhythm of conversation. They had to be quieter tonight; they were near to the road.

‘Promise not to ditch me, okay?’

Nat said. Maggie was glad she had said it; even though these were her classmates, people she had known forever, Maggie had a sudden terror of getting lost in the crowd.

‘No way,’ Maggie said. She tried to avoid looking up, and she found herself unconsciously scanning the crowd for Matt. She could make out a group of sophomores huddled nearby, giggling, and Shayna Lambert, who was wrapped in a blanket and had a thermos of something hot, as though she was at a football game.

Maggie was surprised to see Vivian Travin, standing by herself, a little way apart from the rest of the crowd. Her hair was knotted into dreadlocks, and in the moonlight, her various piercings glinted dully. Maggie had never seen Viv at a single social event-she had never seen her doing much of anything besides cutting classes and waiting tables at Dot’s. For some reason, the fact that even Viv had shown it made her even more anxious.

‘Joh Joh!’ Avery Wallace pushed her way through the crowd and promptly catapulted herself into Joh Joh’s arms, as though he had just rescued her from a major catastrophe. Maggie looked away as Joh Joh leaned down to kiss her. Avery was only five feet- one and standing next to her made Maggie feel like the Jolly Green Giant on a can of corn.

‘I missed you,’ Avery said when Joh Joh pulled away. She still had not even acknowledged Maggie; she had once overheard Maggie call her ‘shrimp faced’ and had never



forgiven her. Avery did, however, look somewhat shrimplike, all tight and pink, so Maggie did not feel that bad about it. Joh Joh mumbled something in return. Maggie felt nauseous, and heartbroken all over again. No one should be allowed to be happy when you were so miserable-especially not your best friends. It should be a law.

Avery giggled and squeezed Joh Joh's hand. 'Let me get my beer, okay? I will be back. Stay right here.' Then she turned and vanished. Immediately, Joh Joh raised his eyebrows at Maggie. 'Don't say it.' 'What?' Maggie held up both hands. Joh Joh stuck a finger in her face. 'I know what you're thinking,' he said, and then jabbed at Nat.

'You are too.'

Nat did her best innocent face.

'Unfair, Marks. I was just thinking about what a lovely accessory she makes. So-o small and convenient.'

'The perfect pocket liner,' Maggie agreed.

'All right, all right.' Joh Joh was doing a fairly excellent job of pretending to be angry.

'Enough.'

'It's a compliment,' Nat protested.

'I said, enough.' But after a minute, Joh Joh leaned over and whispered, 'I cannot keep her in my pocket, you know. She bites.' His lips bumped against Maggie's ear-by accident, she was, sure- and she laughed. The weight of nerves in her stomach eased up a little. But then someone cut the music, and the crowd got still and incredibly quiet, and she knew it was about to begin. Just like that, she felt a numbing cold all over, as though all the rain had solidified and frozen on her skin.

## Part: 14

### Disremembered

Maggie forgot about looking for Joh Joh. She watched, transfixed, as Zavic moved out onto the plank. From the safety of the ground, it looked almost beautiful: the soft haze of rain, Zavic's arms extended, a dark black shape against the clouds. Ray had not come down the ladder. He must have been watching too, although he had moved behind the water tank, so he was invisible.

It happened in a split second; Zavic jerked to one side, lost his footing, and fell. Maggie heard herself cry out. She felt her heart rocket into the roof of her mouth, and in that second, as his arms pin-wheeled wildly and his mouth contorted in a scream, she thought, Nothing and none of us will ever be the same.

And then, just as quickly, he caught himself. He got his left foot back onto the board, and his body stopped swaying wildly from right to left, like a loose pendulum. He straightened up.

Someone screamed Zavic's name. And then the applause began, turning thunderous as he made his way, haltingly, the remaining few feet. No one heard the time that-Digging shouted. No one paid any attention to Ray as he came down the ladder. But as soon as Zavic was on the ground, he flew at Ray. Zavic was smaller than Ray and skinnier, but he tackled him from behind and the move was unexpected. Ray was on the ground, faced in the dirt, in a second.

'You are a freaking asshole. You threw something at me.' Zavic raised his fist; Ray twisted, bucking Zavic off him.

'What are you talking about?'

Ray staggered to his feet, so his face was lit in the glare of the spotlight. He must have cut his lip on a rock. He was bleeding. He looked mean and ugly. Zavic got up too. His eyes were wild-black and full of hatred. The crowd was still frozen, and Maggie once again thought she could hear the rain, the dissolution of a hundred thousand different drops at once. Everything hung in the air, ready to fall.

‘Don’t lie,’ Zavic spat out. ‘You hit me in the chest. You wanted me to fall.’

‘You’re crazy.’

Ray started to turn away. Zavic charged him. And then they were down again, and all at once, the crowd surged forward, everyone shouting, some pushing for a better view, some jumping in to pull the boys off from each other.

Maggie was squeezed from all sides. She felt a hand on her back, and she barely stopped herself from falling.

She reached for Nat’s hand instinctively.

‘Maggie!’ Nat’s face was white, frightened. Their hands were wrenched apart, and Nat went down among the blur of bodies.

‘Nat!’ Maggie shoved through the crowd, using her elbows, thankful now to be so big. Nat was trying to get up, and when Maggie reached her, she let out a scream of pain.

‘My ankle!’ Nat was saying, panicked, grabbing her leg. ‘Someone stepped on my ankle.’ Maggie reached for her, then felt a hand on her back: this time deliberate, forceful. She tried to twist around to see who had pushed her, but she was on the ground, faced in the mud before she could. Feet churned up the dirt, splattered her face with moisture. For just one moment, Maggie wondered whether this-the seething crowd, the surge

was part of the challenge. She felt a break in the crowd, a fractional release.

‘Come on.’ She managed to stand up and hook Nat under the arm.

‘It hurts,’ Nat said, blinking back tears. But Maggie got her to her feet. Then a voice came blaring, suddenly, through the woods, huge and distorted.

‘Freeze where you are, all of you...’

Cops...

Part: 15

Beams of Light

Everything was chaos. Beams of light swept across the crowd, turning faces white, frozen; people were running, pushing to get out, disappearing into the woods. Maggie counted four cops-one of them had wrestled someone to the ground, she could not see who. Her mouth was dry, chalky, and her thoughts disjointed. Her hoodie was smeared with mud, and the cold seeped into her chest.

Joh- John was gone. Joh Joh had the car.

Car. They needed to get out or hide.

She kept a hand on Nat’s arm and tried to pull her forward, but Nat stumbled. Tears welled up in her eyes.

‘I can’t,’ she said.

‘You have to.’ Maggie felt desperate. Where, Joh Joh? She bent down to loop an arm around

Nat’s waist. ‘Lean on me.’ ‘I can’t,’ Nat repeated. ‘It hurts too bad.’

Then Marcel Mason came out of nowhere. He was suddenly next to them, and without pausing or asking permission, he put one of his arms around Nat's waist as well, so that she could be carried between them. Nat gave a short cry of surprise, but she did not resist. Maggie felt like she could kiss him.

'Come on,' he said. They passed into the woods, stumbling, going as quickly as possible, moving away from the booming megaphone-voices, the screaming, and the lights. It was dark. Marcel kept his cell phone out; it cast a weak blue light on the sodden leaves underneath them, the wet ferns, and the shaggy, moss-covered trees.

'Where are, we are going?' Maggie whispered. Her heart was pounding. Nat could barely put any weight on her left leg, so every other step, she leaned heavily into Maggie.

'We have to wait until the cops clear out,' Marcel replied. He was short of breath. A few hundred feet beyond the water towers, nestled in the trees, was a narrow pump house.

Maggie could hear mechanical equipment going inside it, humming through the walls, when they stopped so Marcel could shoulder the door open. It was not locked.

Inside, it smelled like mildew and metal. The single room was dominated by two large tanks and various pieces of rusted electrical equipment; the air was filled with a constant, mechanical thrush, like the noise of a thousand crickets.

They could no longer hear shouting from the woods.

Part: 16

Twisted

'Probably sprained,' Marcel said.

‘Jez-us.’ Nat exhaled heavily and maneuvered onto the ground, extending her left leg in front of her, wincing. ‘It hurts.’

He sat down as well, but not too close.

‘I swear someone cracked it.’ Nat leaned forward and began touching the skin around her ankle. She inhaled sharply.

‘Leave it, Nat,’ Maggie said. ‘We’ll get some ice on it as soon as we can.’ She was cold and suddenly exhausted. The rush she had felt from completing the challenge was gone.

She was wet and hungry, and the last thing she wanted to do was sit in a stupid pump house for half the night. She pulled out her phone and texted Joh Joh. Where are you?

‘How’d you know about this place?’ Nat asked Marcel. ‘Found it the other day,’ Marcel said. ‘I was scouting. Mind if I smoke?’

‘Kind of,’ Maggie said.

He shrugged and replaced the cigarettes in his jacket. He kept his cell phone out, on the floor, so his silhouette was touched with blue.

‘Thank you,’ Nat blurted out. ‘For helping me. That was really... I mean, you did not have to.’

‘No problem,’ Marcel said.

Maggie could not see his face, but there was a weird quality to his voice, like he was choking.

‘I mean; we’ve never even spoken before....’ Maybe realizing she sounded rude, Nat trailed off.

For a minute, there was silence.

Maggie sent another text to Joh Joh.

What The F\*ck?

Then Marcel said abruptly, 'We spoke before. Once. At the pep rally, last year. You called me David.'

'I did?' Nat giggled nervously.

'Stupid. I was drunk. Remember, Maggie? We took those

disgusting shots.'

'Mmmm.' Maggie was still standing. She leaned up against the door, listening to the sound of the rain, which was drumming a little harder now. She strained to hear, underneath it, the continued sounds of shouting. She could not believe Joh Joh still had not texted her back. Joh Joh always responded to her messages right away.

'Anyway, I'm an idiot,' Nat was saying. 'Anyone will tell you that. But I couldn't very well forget a name like Marcel, could I? I wish I had a cool name.'

'I like your name,' Marcel said quietly.

Maggie felt a sharp pain go through her. She had heard in Marcel's voice a familiar longing, a hollowness-and she knew then, immediately and without doubt, that Marcel liked Natalie. For a second, she had a blind moment of envy, a feeling that gripped her from all sides. Of course. Of course, Marcel liked Nat. She was pretty, giggly, small, and cute, like an animal you would find in someone's purse.

-Like-

Avery. The association arrived unexpectedly, and she dismissed it quickly. She did not care about Avery, and she did not care whether Marcel liked Nat, either. It was none of her

business. Still, the idea continued to drum through her, like the constant patter of the rain: that no one would ever love her.

‘How long do you think we should wait?’ Nat asked.

‘Not too much longer,’ Marcel said. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Maggie knew she should have a conversation, but she was too tired.

‘I wish it weren’t so dark,’ Nat said after a few minutes, rustling. Maggie could tell from her voice she was getting impatient.

Marcel stood up. ‘Wait here,’ he said and slipped outside. For a while, there was silence except for a tinny banging-something moving through the pipes and the hiss of water on the roof.

‘I’m going to go to L.A.,’ Nat blurted out suddenly. ‘If I win.’ Maggie turned to her. Nat looked defiant, as though she expected Maggie to start making fun of her. ‘What for...?’ Maggie asked.

‘The surfers,’ Nat said. Then she rolled her eyes. ‘Hollywood, bean brain. What do you think about it?’ Maggie went over to her and crouched. Nat always said she wanted to be an actress, but Maggie had never thought she was serious-not serious enough to do it, not serious enough to play Panic for it. But Maggie just nudged her with a shoulder.

‘Promise me that when you’re rich and famous, you won’t forget the bean brains you knew back when.’

‘I promise,’ Nat said. The air smelled faintly like charcoal.

‘What about you? What will you do if you win?’ Maggie shook her head. She wanted to say: Run until I burst. Build miles



and miles and miles between me and Carp. Leave the old Maggie behind, burn her to dust. Instead, she shrugged. 'Go somewhere, I guess.

Sixty-seven grand buys a lot of gas.'

Nat shook her head. 'Come on, Maggie,' she said quietly. 'Why'd you enter?'

Just like that, Maggie thought of Matt, and the hopelessness of everything, and felt like she would cry. She swallowed back the feeling. 'Did you know?' she said finally.

'About Matt, I mean, and Delaney.'

'I heard a rumor,' Nat said carefully.

'But I didn't believe it.'

'I heard she ... with him...'

Maggie could not say the words. She knew she was a little prude, especially compared to Nat. She was embarrassed about it and proud of it at the same time: she just did not see what was so great about fooling around. 'At the frigging

Arboretum.' 'She's a whore,' Nat said matter of- factly. 'Bet she gives him herpes. Or worse.'

'Worse than herpes?' Maggie said doubtfully.

'Syphilis... Turns you into a mutter.

Puts holes in the brain, swiss- cheese- style.' Maggie sometimes forgot that Nat could always make her laugh. 'I hope not,' she said. She managed to smile. 'He was not that smart, to begin with. I do not think he has a lot of brains to spare.'

'You hope so, you mean.' Nat mimed holding up a glass.

'To Delaney's syphilis.'

‘You’re crazy,’ Maggie said, but she was laughing full-on now.

Nat ignored her. ‘Marry it turn Joel Flores’s brain to delicious, gooey cheese.’

‘Amen,’ Maggie said and raised her arm.

‘Amen.’ They pretended to clink. Maggie stood up again and moved to the door. Marcel was still not back; she wondered what he was doing.

‘Do you think-’ Maggie took a deep breath. ‘Do you think anyone will ever love me?’ ‘I love you,’ Nat said. ‘Joh Joh loves you. Your mom loves you.’ Maggie made a face, and Nat said, ‘She does, Heath bar, in her way.’

-And-

Lily loves you too.’

‘You guys don’t count,’ Maggie said.

Then, realizing how that sounded, she giggled. ‘No offense.’ ‘None took,’ Nat said. After a pause, Maggie said, ‘I love you, too, you know. I would be a basket case without you. I mean it. I would be carted off and, I do not know, drawing aliens in my mashed potatoes by now.’

‘I know,’ Nat said. Maggie felt as if all the years of their lives together, their friendship, were welling up there, in the dark: the time they had practiced kissing on Nat’s mom’s sofa cushions; the first time they had ever smoked a cigarette and Maggie had vomited; all the secret texts in classes, fingers moving under the desk and behind their textbooks. All of it was hers, hers, and Nat’s, and all those years were nestled inside them like one of those Russian dolls, holding dozens of tiny selves inside it.

Maggie turned to Nat, suddenly breathless.

‘Let’s split the money,’ she blurted out.

‘What?’

Nat blinked...

‘If one of us wins, let’s split it.’ Maggie realized, as soon as she said it, that she was right. ‘Fifty-fifty. Thirty grants can still buy a lot of gas, you know.’

For a second, Nat just stared at her.

Then she said, ‘All right. Fifty-fifty.’ Nat laughed. ‘Should we shake on it? Or pinkie swear?’

‘I trust you,’ Maggie said.

Marcel returned at last. ‘It’s clear,’ he said.

Maggie and Marcel supported Nat between them, and together they made their way beneath the water towers and into the clearing that had so recently been packed with characters. Now the only evidence of the crowd was the trash left behind: stamped-out cigarette butts and all the joints, crushed beer cans, towels, a few umbrellas. The truck was still parked in the mud, but its engine was stopped.

Maggie imagined the police officers would bring out a tow for it later. The quiet was strange, and the whole scene felt weirdly creepy. It made Maggie think that everyone had been spirited away into thin air.

Marcel gave a sudden shout. ‘Hold on a second,’ he said and left Nat leaning on Maggie. He moved several feet away and scooped something up from the ground—a transportable cooler. Maggie saw, when he angled his cell phone light onto it, that it still contained ice and beer. However, Joh Joh’s phone

was still going straight to voicemail and was getting cut off on the second ring. Matt and Delaney were intimate sung and warm wooden plank, and the itch in the soles of her feet, telling her to jump.

‘Jackpot,’ Marcel said. He smiled for the first time all night. He took the cooler with them, and when they reached Route 22, he made a substitute ice pack for Nat’s ankle.

There were three beers left, one for each of them at that time, and they drank so much collectively on the side of the road, in the pouring rain, while they waited for the bus to appear. Nat got giggly after just a few sips, and she and Marcel joked about smoking a cigarette to make the bus come quicker, and Maggie knew she should be satisfied.

<3

Interval: 4

Seventeen

Chapter: 7

Part: 1

(Back)

It all started two years ago; I drew for her, to see what she would think. She likes it... but it was not enough to get her talking. Two weeks later she was with him... what does she see in him?

Sometimes- I go to see her... at this little place in the same town. Where she is the worth that I can feel in what is left of my broken heart.

Sending letters that the father never gave- yes, as much as I can, I go to be around her, to see that smile and these

braces on her teeth that smile that brightens my day. Not always with success do I get attention, but at least I can see her and her amazing eyes.

Who knows it might even get a hello from her- she is perfect in every way! I did see anything wrong with having a seventeen-year-old dream girl at the time.

Back then it all started with me making the crazy decision to ask her to marry me, over a social networking site, I sure her boyfriend loved me asking her that question. But at the time I did not give a shit, I knew what I wanted, and I was not going to let anything get in the way.

She must think I am smoking something, or that I am just completely awake! Because I hardly even know her in true reality, but I know everything about her in my mind.

I have never felt so attached to anyone like this before. Just thinking about this is making me foolish. Not knowing anything about her, yet I cannot help, but feel as if she is the one for me. That the search is finally over! I found the one for me, there is one more issue and that is her family.

My mind is running fast and with intention what I should do next. Oh, networking is a double-edged sword; her profile on the web is a tease.

But then again is love? I guess...? Let us just say that I did get an answer, but I did know that there was so much more than I needed to wait for...

Part: 2

Ponder

Did I just scare her away?

Oh no- what did I do? She will see that I admire her? She will think what I asked was sweet and she thinks I am a freak. Hum- What does Olivia think? It is like- 'Open mouth insert foot,' or not say anything and lose her to him.

What should I do, what can I do?

Her boyfriend Brandon is going to kill me! Yet, I have a heart ring sitting on my nightstand. Is she going to be single soon, just because you have photos and relationship status as taken but does not mean that you are his mind, body, and soul? Or are you dating him because that is what others want, like your family?

Without me knowing what to do or think, this thought popped into my head? Would her friends approve of us even being together? I know some of them may, and then again how do I know what they might say, hopefully, it is all good. Will I ever know?

Oh yes, she is still in high school, and I am six years older; but age is just a number, right?

She did a drawing, and it was breathtaking, I commented, and things started to work out. But will this have blessed lucky streak last?

However, the ice has been broken.

Artwork and creativity can open all kinds of doors, even the one to the heart... Did she make this impress me? As of now, I do not know, however it was excessive, wonderful, and beautiful. Just what I was looking for, someone that enjoys the same things that I do.

What more can I ask for?

On the 28th I do not know what to think. Yes, no, maybe? Someone give me a sign or something? The love heart line flat-lined until the 14th of the next month, which was a win. The relationship finally took off.

The online conversion was light-hearted and modest.

Nevertheless, it was a remarkable achievement of accomplishment; looking back at how complete it can be just to let her know that I am even there. Just must see what the next couple of days bring.

There is a date on the way. I wished her goodnight and sweet dreams and must see what the next day brings me.

On the 22nd, what an amazing day, I got to speak to her at last in the place where one can meet and greet, yet I had a few interruptions; I could help it, I was unusually popular that day.

She was so cute about it... with her braces on her teeth, and the way she looks at me. When she woke me up, I could not speak because she wanted my- complete attention in the place.

Finally, at the cash register that magic spot for flirting together... We talked more face to face, no screen of allowance, no button to click, just real stimulation of interaction. It was all nervously publicized to one another so that just led to the plans to talk online more, awesome!

The perfect girl what can I say, to be so close yet, feel miles away. I want to run to her but must walk out the door the other way. The only words spoken to her are- 'Have a nice day.'

Thinking about her and the summer and what it could be with her reminds me of Seventeen- you are on my mind all the time and I think about you, yet we are not together. The stars shining combined with ribbon holding hands forever.

These are the days we could have together. It could be like Sunflowers, Hayfields, kissing in the rain, no more brick walls, falling teardrops, no more prize spaces remaining.

True love should not be such a game; does she feel the same? She is everything, she is seventeen. What if every day could be like this: Dimmed rings, football games, and a movie on the weekends? It is a plan to see you belong to me, she is everything that reminds me of Seventeen everything that is in our dreams. Everything she does is amazing, but then again, I am just speculating.

On the 26th I do not have much to say, there is something in the way, let us see what happens on another day. On the 27th I gave her a guitar pick to make into a nickel, I hope she liked it, I got her to smile! But is she going to know the meaning behind it or not?

She looked at the message that I made before 4:58 pm. What did I tell her about? Let us see if this becomes a date?

The 29th so when are you going to let me take you out, to a movie or something of your choice?

The 30th is all over 'I don't know...' Those are the words that answer all the unanswered questions.

Note: I wish I had met her sooner so that we could be together. Back when I was in school. It would have been nice to be the same age and to be seventeen again and know what I know now and doing the same things... but it is ok hopefully we can still make it work. Even if I cannot date her, I still want to be a part of her life.

The 1st is a new month. Is love going to start up for me? But right now, he is still in the way. The leaves are changing and



so am I, but I just cannot wait any longer? October is in the air, and it would be perfect to get together!

On the 2nd I cannot sleep, I cannot think, I cannot breathe, hell I eat a whole box of apple jacks in one day. Am I falling in love with a girl that I know that I can never have, yes, she is seventeen?

And what gets me is she feels the same way about me, yet the social world thanks to that he is the one for her... why not he is her age and the boy toy that most of the high school girls drool over. All I have to say is that we will have to see, what is meant to be?

On the 5th I do not know what to think.

On the 12th it is not over, if anything it is a fresh start!

The 19th being romantic is not dead, and it does exist. You just need to be with the right guy, who can show you what real expressions of love are! :0

Where do you consider places for romance? - Romance does not exist do not kid yourself, has a guy ever asked you to marry him? - Yes, but not whom you would expect0

On the 22nd I got to see my girl today and invited her to my book thing so... ya-ah me! Let us see if she comes to see me.

On the 28th everyone sucks in this town but what else is new, and I learned that it is uncool to tie your shoes. Carved Halloween stuff...

On the 6th of November, I saw her today, and it was awesome, like magic, and I went to her too small because of an inside joke. The 7th and 6th are forecasted to be romantic. Let us see if we make it into a joint partnership.

She is going to feel this on the 7th.

Today you will have a chance to change certain areas of your life, especially your love life. You will seek adventure - not in the physical sense of a journey anywhere, but the metaphysical sense of a journey within. You get a new perspective on your relationship and feel like a whole new world has opened to you.

Partners will never seem the same again.

On the 8th so I asked via the social network, how is your Thursday going? What have you been up to! – She answered on another web page her reply to me, it is like a secret message to me, however, she is with him; seeing a scary movie that is boring to her to the point of agony.

‘I think that If you’re with the right person, then you should not be bored, or watching the movie.’ You should, making out the whole time, and cuddling with one another. Does she want to be with me, but can’t be? However, is she happy being unappreciated by him? What is going to happen? Is this seventeen-flame going workout or happen?

There is a lot of speculation circulating about your love life now. It could take a new and quite different path forward, sooner than you think. All this is good news, although you may worry about how your relationship will be affected. Shake off that pessimistic view and allow a miracle to unfold. Then take that first step forward.

11/ 9/ 13

I do not know why but I feel like it is going to be an amazing day!

You have had a lot of dates and met a lot of interesting people, but at times like the beginning of the week, you yearn

for that special someone in your life who knows you well, someone you can tell all your problems to.

Platonic friends can turn into something more if there is an attraction combined with intimacy midweek. Taking the relationship to the next level can be complicated but fulfilling. The flow of dating energy is different at the beginning of the week, so take advantage of it and mix things up a little.

When you go somewhere out of the ordinary you open your chances of meeting exciting new people! You run up against some stiff competition at the end of the week. Whether you like it or not, you will have to prove yourself if you want to 'win' the affection of your latest crush.

On the 9th it is all over and I do not know what to do!

The 13th Bartering is the name of the game to get you back-

Sometimes, I get so preoccupied trying to perfect everything that I forget to appreciate the things that are already perfect. Have you ever been in love with a girl that you cannot have?

I am getting older now and feel as if I am weathering away. Yes, just one day closer to the casket, or am I in it. This life I have had has done nothing but pressure me into becoming what I never intended to be. Then again look at what I get to show for it. I got everything I ever wanted just not in the way I want it to be.

I sit with a non-filled heart of thinking that life is so unfair, listening to my mind as it spins like a tornado through Kansas and all the thoughts of what can and cannot be rushing like a bolt through my brain. All this takes me to a place that I

will never be again. If only I would have done this and not that...  
If only that is all I think about.

Nonetheless, mostly I think of all the existences from back in the days of seventeen. Why seventeen, you ask? While it was everything real to me, the only thing I wanted, all that I still think about. 'She was a black-haired beauty with big blue dog eyes.' Her eyelashes could put you in trances as they blinked. She was petite in her stature, but she had it all if you know what I am saying.

Pulse I was going to get into that skirt, and the way I could. She has those sweet pink lips, which could curl up your toes, even to this day, oh yes! I was young once, but you grow old fast. If you do not have anything to keep you young, what do I have to live for?

Back when she was on the edge of seventeen and my life was entertaining, pleasurable, and stimulating. Everything seems flawless when with her; she was, and still is flawless in my eyes. But everything changes and everything moves on. But she still talks to me and dances around me.

Yet we cannot be together as we would like to be you see. Those days were over a long time ago.

She was the gasoline that lit my match on fire, and only she had the right moisture or what it took to extinguish it out. We filled each other up with our hopes and dreams. Let us not forget about compassion.

We filled each other up on the pitches and surrounding grounds too, do not get me wrong. But there was more there than just young stupid lust here. Something deeper that sucks down on you to the point where you do not know what you are going to do. You feel that your head is going to explode, it will

make your bean spin and go numb. But is this what you would call love?

Is this what we all come back for more of? All this year, I think of what I have missed. All these years I said this is true love? But to this day I do not know if love is real or just a state of mind, which is a ghost that haunts me. How do you love something that cannot be shown to everyone that they love you back? I still have a two-carat heart-shaped diamond ring around my neck on the ball chain that my ear tags -was- ones did, the ring was going to be hers; it will most likely go to the grave with me, and the tag will be in her bark padded box forever.

Love is not- loving unless it is shown to the world- right? Is love just getting it on, or is it about being soul mates? I am, and an old man, and I still have no clue... What is love; to some love is L for lust that makes you want to get it all, to do whatever you can to please.

O is Oh shit this is going to be crazy, and what should I do next. V is for virgins having victory getting to the next level, saying I got to touch and feel it. E is for Exposed, and unsatisfied, that is love for some.

On the other hand, if you are like me, I try to believe that Nat King Cole sings love the way it should be, but most of the time that kind of love is just a fantasy. If you are like me you have to believe in a little of both, just to see what it is all about.

My life is just like flipping through the pages of an organized book, you will understand my life and what it was all about, was it a waste of time? Or did my life have something more? I guess we will have to gaze into notes to see.

I was told in 1945, I was a twenty-two-year-old soldier back from the battlefields and the air raids, and looking for my innocence, and Olivia Sartre's was the girl for me.

Her father was a teacher at the local high school; he knew that and believed that I had found love within his precious little girl. This man hated my guts, but the feeling was mutual. Around this time when I was at war Olivia was a worker at the local café. She was only seventeen, and as shy as can be in her ways and was so sweet to talk to and even sweeter to gaze at.

Plus, up to this point in her life, she was not that interested in any other boys, but we were close associates all of our lives, so would say more than friends.

However, destiny has its plans that no one can foresee, do you believe in soul mates? If you are anything like me, you still do not know what I am doing when it comes to love. Love can make you seem crazy to the ones that just do not understand.

With Olivia, I felt like I had the world by the ass and was loved. I had to leave my little coal mine town to go and fight.

Oh, I am not saying that war did not fix us boys up with our ladies the nights to make us man... but I was the man that I was supposed to be before I left. Anyways that type of girl was not my style.

Oh, temptation can make you go out of your mind, but there was only one thing that was stopping me. That was a promise that I made to Olivia, who was about to turn seventeen in a month or so at the time. I would write her a love letter every day. If I could, I would still have all of them sitting here on my desk breaking apart in old age.

But as of now and this present day my heart is heavy, and my hands are weak, as she sits with memory at my feet. Yeah, I am not the rock that I used to be, but her rock displeases her name and her birthdate. This is one thing that I have now that reminds me of what she once was to me, and what she is

to me as of now. I could not hold a pen in my hands if I tried, but I walk to see her every day or at least I try, seeing that gleaming stone just makes me want to cry anyway but still I do it, I hope for the day that I die, is that wrong?

Some would say that it is not manly to keep a scrapbook; well, I do not give two shits or care what others think, you see. This book holds the memories of us, and even more that no one has ever seen before. It is a book of secrets that no one knows about other than me, but it is in my testament that Kristen will be given it, and what she does is completely up to her at that time.

In the winter, I like to sit in my chair at night in the living room and go through the pages one by one. Knowing that when I get to the end, I will close the book, and start all over again, seeing something that I missed from before. Every time something comes to mind, all the things that happened during that moment in time, that are escaping my mind slowly. Beholding the photographs, and notes reading, and looking at them so intently by the light of the fireplace, that my eyes shoot blood... I need to get new bifocal glasses?

Each page comes to life, and the photo starts to move as if I can investigate that time and place just like a slow-moving film clip. I can see all the scenes play out, I can feel, taste, and even hear, what was going on in the frame; as I view it into each one, just like a porthole of the bygone.

Some of these relics make my heartbeat rapidly fast and others bring tears to my eyes, some make me joyful, and others are very disheartened. I think that I have been blessed for all this time that I have had. Blessed for the times we had, and all that was part of my life, most of them are going, nevertheless, I can still get the sensation from them all, as I recall them and let them shine into my collective soul.

Besides in times of creed, she takes me to a higher place- with her arms wide open, and wings vast in midair. This was all part of her sacrifice... yet how are we going to be remembered? When - am the only one that remembers her now?

In my book with a brown cover, I start from the beginning and see our little faces in shades of gray. Though faded I can still make it all out. The first pages are ripping and tattered from being so timeworn. The binding of my book is hard there anymore, and you see the strings that hold it together, and some pages are falling out.

All my notes of my life are- now yellowing, all the love letters I wrote with a pen that I had to dip into an inkwell, all of this is my life that I planned to make into a book someday. But someday it never came for me. I planned this story for us. I thought it would be quite different; the end of the scrapbook or manuscript has not been made yet, because I do not have an end to show or write as of now. To me, the end was in the middle, and that is when I lost interest in creative expressions.

Part: 3

warfare

All these notes... some from Olivia, some from the war, some from others that loved me, this all tells a story, and it is just all history now.

‘Nothing lasts forever it is all going to be dust in the wind.’ ‘Evenhandedly I gave you everything, just for you to die with a smile; all you wanted was to live for a while. You took everything, but it left you empty.’ So much we do not understand, all I ever wanted to be happy ever after.’



I am so tired of being here, without you, even if you are here next to me in ghostly form. You are the evanescence of my Immortal love. All this time has passed, after you pass away, yet it cannot erase you from me, now or ever. I whipped your tears then and I would even now, nothing has changed, only the moment in time. 'You still have all of me!'

I see myself in the glossy stone one more, and I see that the young man is gone, and this timeworn outer self is all that is left. This deep-rooted body is all that reminds me of what I used to be, and it mocks and howls at me as I try to be as I was back then.

The moon sheens and the rock are shown as a colorless shade of gay agent the black starfield heavens, the grave is all that is alive, and the world is dying around me.

I can see my breath wobbling within poufs out of my mouth as exhaling; yes, I try to walk away and leave it all this behind me, but the bound is just too tight. She was always so tight. So, tight she could squeeze, just like she was when she was seventeen.

The feeling I have is more intense than anyone could imagine. 'Some of them just hurt, and some of them hurt so well. Yet the best was with her when she was alive.'

Olivia grabs me by the ankles, and she rises to hold me close to me, being this old it terrifies the shit out of me quite truthfully, but I love it because I adore her.

She knows all this, yet she follows me on the trail back to the homestead. She is the worst that I had now, that my blood is getting so cold.

On the way home I must rest, as I said I am not what I used to be, I walk to the gazebo on the pond; the pathway is

overgrown with tall grasses and last roses of summer now, and the old yellow wood rowboat float over the mist tied by its rope that is fraying away.

The whitewashed timber bridge is splinted and falling apart just as is the gazebo itself. But then again, I am just too damn old to fix it, in a sighing breath heavily- thinking that no one else knows what this place means to me, and no one cares, really it is just one of those places that were our memories. If I could choose a song that would fit my life it would be 'Remember When' by Alan Jackson.

That song plays in my mind as I sit, and think now that I have lived an undaunted, yet all right life; you have what you have, and you are blessed when you have it, so do not take it greedily or you will lose it. I reason with myself drawing in a breath and letting it go slowly. I cannot remember who I was, back then, as my heart is heavy, and my hands are shaky now.

Besides looking back into the depths, and craves of my mind, I can see that she was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and I was the prey.

Will you pay for your sins, yet she creeps and plays with my brain and the visions or so real but are they an illusion or something more? She ties up my thoughts but is it all a waste? It is enough to drive you out of your mind. You know that I cannot say that I have any regrets.

Nash- The chrome grill is pitted, and the headlight glass smashed, and the inside is trashed, from getting wet too many times.

It needs some love, just like me.

But it is more work than what I can do anymore, so it is just another memory of our memories.

We used to drive around, running all the traffic lights, wild and crazy as could be, and share our time, and make secrets in the back seats. I would kick up dirt in the air as would drive to our spot, the gazebo on the pond. If that car could talk it would remember more than it does.

Maybe I should write a story about the car coming back to life and haunting me. I could give the car a cute name, or has someone already done that? I cannot remember, but that would be a book, or maybe I have read it... shit, it sucks to get old. It is impossible to love and be wise, it makes your brain soft.

I love some of this new saying these young kids say, Just the same as saying in today's terms being what is called whipped; this is what she was to me. However, I still do not mind it being that way. Having her whipping me makes me feel alive. The more pain the more I feel from her the more she knows that I love her, and she loves me.

Pain is love! Pain is all I have; pain is like the rain without her on top of me, rain, and pain it washes the memories away from my mind. Pain and the rain are all that comes from these old eyes, that I rub red, pain as the rain that will cry over the spot that will hold my old remains.

I was praying, but I see it as more like being scared of life. Though back then I was praying to get next to her in any way possible. If I could only get myself back, then... it comes around.

She was the one that was going to take me to places and give me expressions that I could not express or have with any other girl. To this day I am not sure what to make of my own story, because it is never going to be easy for me to explain.

What was in the past is in the past, and I do not care anymore about what is in my future. What I have lived for was a dream that was never going to be, a dream that burnt me to a crisp, and I will arise from the ashes someday.

Oh shit! I did not remember to tell you my name while it was Deniel, or did I tell you that? This is my story of what it takes to have a sweetheart or love, what it takes to walk away, and yes never look back all your life, never hear that voice again, never hear that laugh again.

Also, back then some of these times saddened me even more than now. Knowing that all the coldness that I am feeling is me dying inside, but I am going to go through this story one more time before my time is upon this earth.

I recall when I was nineteen my life transformed incessantly, and all I had that kept me going was a love that I nicknamed seventeen Olivia. It, not an easy story for me to tell, it has its twists and turns, and it is- turned- on,

Just like having the land with its mountains of majesty that was blissful, that contest with its tragic storms. Just the same as us we have the hopes', and our joys and we had a lot of disappointments, now that I am older, so much older, I can close my eyes and all I have is a photographic snapshot in my mind to remained me just like showing the mountains we climb together, she was ripped away from my grasp hands. Just like that last hug, she was pulled away in tears.

Yes, as much as I could, I want to be around her, and to see that smile, I remember when she was thirteen with those cute braces on her teeth and that smile that looked at me so gently. It has never changed in my mind.

Not always with success did I get her full attention, there was someday that she was moody, but that was okay by

me. All girls have that time that they need to deal with, she would just say the way. Besides, sometimes others are wanting her devotion, as her asshole dad, but I was mostly happy then because at least I can see her and look into her amazing blue eyes.

I can still hear her saying hello and saying my name. She was so perfect in every way! I did not see anything wrong with having a seventeen-year-old dream girl at the time. She was my mystery fantasy that was real in my life.

Looking at my hands you can read all the crevasses, and the split forks in the trail that was my life, the paths that ended far too soon. No, my hands and palms are different from how they once were back then. They are not like the ones she held, what happened to my lifeline, heart line, and most importantly marriage line? The lines have changed, but why if the plans were made?

Where- they- taken from me? What did I do? To this day, I do not know. There must have been some reason for this to happen this way? I look at my fingerprint, each finger is different, and so unlike hers.

Everyone has unique prints, which we leave behind. She had some of the smallest hands I have ever seen in my life, but they were sweet and felt amazingly perfect on me.

Every line that was on her palms was strong and showed her love of the flesh, her true faith, and love for life, she was a giver, she never asked for anything, but love in return. But she just had given it all away.

The fingerprints she made on me are now going forever. It is just like that kiss that comes to me in my shot drams at the down, it is just a trance that you always had over me.

Looking back in the 1940s: I have never felt so attached to anyone like this before. Just thinking about her now is making me foolish. She can say my name, and it makes my week even now. I cannot help it! Back then I had the feeling as if she were the one for me. That the search is finally over, I know this feels like day one! I believe that... I found the one for me, maybe... There is one large issue, and that was her dad. He had been in love with her since she was born, but not the kind of love that most have for their little girls, this was oddly different.

Nonetheless, it was not long until I had her completely and forever. Be careful of what you wish for, you may just get it one way or another. Reality is never as it seems, and life likes to skew with you.

At this time, I was living in a one-bedroom house that I rented for 17 dollars a month, a few years before my mother and father we all lived in a house on 17th street, anyways both of my parents typed to fly off a bridge together and live... yes, that is not going to happen. They were coming home from a new year's party smashed.

So, I have been in my senses since I was seventeen. Seventeen, seventeen! It is the number that has been hunting me down for years.

Part: 4

Although I felt lucky because I had a radio in my home, the home I always wanted was the one in the pond. We were going to live here together.

I feel that I could do anything if I just imagined I could. That is the way you think when you are young. So-o, one day I left I made the crazy decision to ask Olivia 'seventeen' to marry me, in a letter that I handed to her. But here was the shitter; I was stepping foot on a bus that was taking me to this far away

land. She was the only one to see me off as her dad pulled us apart. I can still see that she was wearing a light blue dress with a white daisy in her heart.

I am sure her overprotective father loved me asking her that question because he nosed in all our stuff, and kept things that I sent to her hidden, and that was the beginning of the end.

Because he had to know everything about her, yes, I mean everything. But at the time I did not give a shit, I knew what I wanted, and she wanted me, and I was not going to let anything get in the way, not even the war, or at least that is what we wanted to believe.

That reminds me now that sometimes I walk into the bathroom, and she writes the word seventeen in blood on the mirror, and her face shows up in the shower mist as I wash. She just loves to play around with me in that room. Ha, that's cute! She has a way about her that makes me lovesick.

Back to my story- The journey to hell is not where I wanted to go at all, no this was hell on earth, I am in a far-off land from what I was used to where no one even knows my name, yes to go and kill the slanted eyed mean, to this day I still have no idea why this event took place. It was senseless and stupid, I am not a baby killer or a tree hugger, yet the metals on my chest would say that I am.

They all remind me of what I had to endure, and all the friends that I lost like Jack Row and Tom Richford, that went missing at sea in their planes, there are more but I cannot remember their names, I have a photo of all of us, but the faces are nameless to me now. But I do remember how I lost you.

Like I am supposed to be proud of killing another human being, I do not know...not really, I just do not think it is an honor worthy only if truly needed.

The air force threw my bony ass into a plane faster than you can say suck on this Japs, shit! There is nothing like having rounds of ammunition flying past your head. Every bolt you think it is all over, besides having what appeared to look like Satan's face coming at you as your in-flight, get ever so closer till you could see them snarling at you. Never back down, until they are right in front of you; anticipating the whole time that the baster goes down before you do. Now I sit back and think that my grandbaby is driving an orange Toyota Corolla, nice right, bullshit, and there it is sitting in the driveway.

So back in the plane, I was hoping that the bullets that I was firing would go through their head because in World War II you had one choice: kill or be killed.

Because if not it always ended in a death spiral.

Those that were going down, a lot of them were clever ass holes if they knew that they were dying they would take out a ship with them, it was like a bam explosion, or they would land in the ocean never to be seen again, this was all part of Pearl Harbor, and I still cannot believe that I made it out of there in one piece.

But who cares anymore, it seems as if today people do not remember the story of the past, hell most- young people do not even believe that the Holocaust even existed?

Most just sit in their mother's basement licking the peanut butter off bananas, and popping cherries, and talking shit about nothing relevant. Yes, that is a metaphor if you went to school, and got an education you would know that.

You know that is what this cauterizing need is- another good war, so your smartass knows what it is like to not have every damn thing handed to you. Then you would see how smart you are in boot camp and the bush.



I was a drill sergeant also, so I do not take bullshit from anyone. I will march your ass off until you have some respect for authority, and something more than your simple little life. Then again, I have seen all this with my own two eyes, and I can still taste the blood, and the smell of rotting flesh, you have no idea what that is like, that small is something that is locked up in your mind and never leaves your wisdom.

I flew in a single-engine, single-seat monoplane, with a mockery of a half-naked pinup girl painted on the front which just reminded me of my own seventeen baby-back home. Things were so crude back then that firing a gun was like pissing your name in the snow.

I remember squinting with one eye, firing the gun in one hand, and flying the plane with the other, and your feet controlling the flaps, it was ridiculous how difficult it was. Especially when most pilots had never flown- a plane before in his life just like me.

Yet hoping that we all can make it home in one piece, most of my colleagues did not. Those poor bastards are still out in the ocean just fish food, and yet no one cares or gives a damn about them. They are just an eighty-year-old story of who gives a shit.

The day I left I made the crazy decision to ask her to marry me, in a letter that I handed to her, As I stepped foot on the bus that was taking me to this far away land, she was the only one to see me off that I treasured, I can still see what she was wearing a light blue dress with a white daisy in her heart.

I am sure her overprotective father loved me asking her that question. But at the time I did not give a shit, I knew what I wanted, and I was not going to let anything get in the way, not even the war.

My letter reads- My sweet Olivia; I must say how I feel about you. That there is nothing more I would want to be yours forever and ever. When you are reading this, I will already be on my way. Nevertheless, I ask you to weigh me to return, it is not that long so we can be together once more. That is if you love me, as I love you. However, I must go far, far away as of now. I have gotten to know you in every way, and I will think of you every day.

I would have liked to say this to you, but I am making you this promise if I make it back from this war. I want to be the one that is married to you.

I wish I had said all this sooner, so that we could have been together, but is age only a number? Even if I do not see you again, I am now forever part of your life.

Your devoted lover- Brandon.

~\*~

Back when I was in school, she was too young for me. It would have been nice to be the same age, yes it would be nice to be seventeen again, and know what I know now, and do the same things.

But you cannot live twice. To this day, I do not know if she had ever seen this love note or not, yet she has not said. But up till now, she knows what I wanted and that was her.

After I gave this letter to her, I knew that my life would never be the same. Though I did not know if that was a good thing or a sad thing, it was just the way it had to be.

Plus, I had never been away from home; I have never been more than ten miles away from my hometown of Coalville. I planned to putt this ring on her tiny finger, but I never got the chance to do it.

The journey of life is through uncovering the true beauty that lies behind the eyes. It is not what is seen all the time it is what is felt, the same as how I feel towards Olivia, she made me joyful and blissful. Someday soon our souls can be rejoined as one as they were in this life.

I feel as if I will never be happy again, even though I have my granddaughter she just reminds me of everything I can and cannot have anymore.

My greatest fear is being alone and dying alone. I look at myself now and there is not one trait about myself that I find desirable, yet I have Army photos of back in the day, the snapshot stuck that are lost in time, I wonder what happened to me. My current state of mind is not a healthy one. Maybe I am just old or crazy or I just do not care anymore. One of the others I need a deep sleep anyway. So maybe I will go to sleep with her ghost on top of me. But I always thought that I would go into the arms of my beloved Olivia.

I never had any great achievements in my life, I never went to college. I worked in the coal mines most of my career, and all I have now to show for it is blacked lungs and Parkinson's disease. They drop you down in the hole, and you work on your stomach like a rat. With the water running down your back and into your ass crack, the work sucked.

Shoveling for nickels and dimes and giving it all back to the company. But I made enough to get my dream house on the pond but had one little girl to share it with and that was our baby that she named Abbie. I came back from the war and was handed a baby to raise. At the time, I did know if I could do it or not. But I did my best. Everything was fine until she was seventeen; I do not want to say any more about it right now.

I have lived in this town most of my life, I have seen people come and go, seen houses being built, and I have seen

the same very house being ripped down. That is when you know you have a life too long. I watched babies grow up before my eyes- into things that cannot be controlled, and I saw- my grandbabies too. I ask what more do I need really?

Part: 5

Honey

I am the easiest person to have a good relationship with, as I know, and

I understand how this world works. As of now, I dislike everything about my appearance, my skin blotchy, and my hair is gray, my eyes are faded green.

Looking back if I could change one thing about my life, I would go back into time and do all the things that I never did or got to see with her next to me and do all the things that- I was going to do throughout life, I had plans and those dreams could come true without her.

Born to live, born to die, some say... while- my saying is all is fair in love and war, because; I have done both, with each of them having the same consequences.

I will never lie to anyone or tell them something untrue. My type of personality is to be blunt and to the point, as you should know by now. If you are an ass hole, I will tell you that to your face. I am not a very forgiving person anymore, you have three chances with me, and after that, I am done with you. You would be the same way if you had a life like mine. Call me better; call me pathetic, your names mean nothing to me anymore nor did they ever.

My mind goes back to these days often because she pulls at my heartstrings, like a gutter being tuned too tightly. To

the point that I feel as if I am going to choke on the wood splinters.

Like the first time we met I was in the first grade, in a one-room schoolhouse that had all eight grades in one sitting arrangement, she was crying because of separation anxiety, or that she had to walk to school in freezing rain either way she was upset, or it was something more. I was the only one there that cared or knew how she felt, or I was the only one that was under her influence.

I tried to make it okay for her, from that point I had a crush on her that never seems to subside. I was going to do whatever I could to be there for her.

Why?

Why- I do not know, she was unlike anyone or anything that was in my life at that time, I was mesmerized.

She had everything that I desired even back then up through school, and she knows it, it is confusing how love works?

The ice has been broken; artwork and creativity can open all kinds of doors, even the one to the heart. Did she make this impression of a drawing that I still have?

As of now, I do not know, however it was excessive, wonderful, and beautiful. Just what I was looking for, someone that enjoys the same things that I do.

What more can I ask for?

I remember this one day when I was in school, she did a drawing, and it was breathtaking, I made a comment, and things started to work out for me, but just me being a boy I had no

clue what I was doing. But will this blessing of a lucky streak last till the end of my life or will it change my life forever!

I remember art class and sitting behind her wanting to touch her hair because it looked so soft. I felt high just by being in her presence and smelling that scent that was unique here, which after all these years never changed.

My granddaughter's name is Kristin, she is all I have left; she just had her seventh birthday, so I wonder how much longer I will have her in my life?

Indeed, Kristen is the only thing that keeps me going, she is the only light in my life. She reminds me of the girl that I affectionately named 'seventeen.' Yes, in every way, her personality, action, laughter, and when I look into her eyes it is all the same as if I am looking into the eyes of my love. I had never spoken about seventeen until now to her; no one even knows about the story but, yet Olivia would be her grandmother, not even my granddaughter, now about seventeen.

Now that I am getting older, and getting closer to that casket, I feel that I should share my story with someone, so I decided on Kristen.

I have some of it on paper, yet my royal typewriter just smiles at me.

Because I start and stop, plus the button letter N has gone missing, where it has to go is a mystery too. Now that would be a delightful book... 'The Missing N' by Brandon Deniel-ha! Now that is funny. Yes, I am an author in my mind!

So... that is just okay with me I am not a writer, I can even get a complete thought on the first page. There is nothing more annoying than that first white page, maybe there is, but I

need to get this down somehow to get this despair to stop playing in my head. The paper is so old now that it is yellow.

The stack is just like my cracked teeth; hell, the little bell does not even go dying anymore. Plus, my hands hurt most of the time now... Ahh- never mind. I have spent most of my life trying to become what I am not. That is just another damn dream that went down the shitter and just like the planes in World War two.

Taking a drink and choking on it hard as it goes down- Anyways Kristen's parents Abbie and Divide, back in the day it is still mysterious what happened exactly. But David pushed her car off the side of a cliff as he was chasing behind her in his old work truck. The black marks on the highway made me believe that as so; you would not have such markings on the road if it was not forced?

Kristen's dad ended up with glass going through his chest cutting through his spine but lived paralyzed from the hips down. Abbie, whom I did not speak of until now, ended up steering column through my heart at the age of seventeen.

The steering column through the heart was not from the fall, it was done before the car went over the drop-off. It seems so unfair... only seventeen at the time. She could have had it all, a college degree, she could have been a doctor or something like that; no, she had to choose to be his b\*tch, and she sucked his ass from day one until she died.

The divide was a monster just the same as Olivia's dad was to her; this just seemed to be an evil pattern in my life. The ones I loved were gone forever at the age of seventeen, and then they hunted me because I was the one that cared about them.

They call me to their graves at night, and what can I do? I have to talk to them. They hug me, and then I come home and sit at the typewriter. With the desk lamp lighting, the keys and my hands are shaking on top of the buttons.

I am thinking maybe I can tell someone what goes on in my life. But their voice calls out to me Paul... Pa-ul and I have to stop, it is like they do not want others to know what they do to me.

Kristen thinks I have flipped my nuts! There is no point in trying to find the key to their heart if you do not know the shape of the lock, so why keep going?

Only one of these spirit girls stays with me all the time. She follows me everywhere in the spirit of seventeen-year-old Olivia. When people die, they stay the same age even in the afterlife. They look the same, just transparent; Olivia is a tiny girl; she stands at five nothing.

And still her eyes peer into my eyes into my soul like always.

Exhale noisily- Abbie used to come to me crying, with black eyes, and blood dripping from her inner thighs, saying to me look at what he is doing to me, I would say stay here... you do not need him, but she always went back to him, and there was not a thing I could do. He had an almost demonic power over her, just the same as Olivia's father, they sucked the life out of these girls, in many ways, and used them whenever they wanted, and then threw them out like trash when they didn't.

Divided was even more obnoxious to my grandbaby

Kristen, God only knows what he did to her... Kristen has a memory that terrifies my thought of mind. It reminds me of what Olivia went through in her childhood life, it all the same



only the names change, or so it seems to be, it is the curse of seventeen. When thinking about it creeps me out.

I wish all those assholes would have taken their belts and hanged themselves with it, no! That would be too good for them... either way, justice comes with a price, and that was seventeen-year-old innocents and seventeen-year-old existences. These so-called men can fry in hell!

But that is a life I know one thing; I always try to do the right thing because after they are gone you have nothing but sad misgivings.

Raged David as I called him walked away, but later that year he put a rifle in his mouth and blew his brains all over his bedroom walls, on a life-size poster of my little granddaughter.

So now Abbie clings to my ankles as I walk to the cemetery as well. Yet I cannot help but say I told you so, and she says I-NO-O in a moaning vocal-sounding whisper!

Some say Abbie drove her blue Chevy bell air off the side of a mountain in a suicide; it was easier for them to say, than saying that a coal truck smashed into her and pushed her off the highway.

At least I have a seventeen-year-old friend, and his name is Jack Daniels. The weird girl I ever loved has died at the age of seventeen, even my daughter, so I just made the choice to never love again, and I have kept that promise up till this point.

All these years... I have been pinning or what I cannot have, so it is okay to drown my sorrows.

Abbie, she had a lover at the age of fifteen you see, she had Kristen at sixteen, little did I know that when I was fighting

in the war Olivia was seven weeks pregnant it is so scary how this all happened so fast, so it seemed, however

Olivia kept that a complete secret from everyone, even her dad, until it started to show.

Part: 6

Hope

I remember going to the movies on the weekends, and what you would call making out the whole time. I remember going to dances and learning how to jitterbug with her. I could twirl her around like you would not believe, I remember going rollerblading on Sundays too, wishing the days would never end, oh yes, it is all coming back to me, those were the good old days.

I walk with a cane now, and ever since I got back from the war, I was shot in the foot. So, I was discharged earlier than expected, with the Medal of Honor, for the reason of my so-called bravery; that I had in the mission of flight number you guessed it flight number seventeen. My best friend Aaron would have got off on his plane if I had known that I would have at least said goodbye.

Yes, I was the only plane that survived, and that was me in plane number seventeen, with the black-haired blue-eyed pinup girl on the front.

When I got back that medal meant nothing to me, because I lost everything I ever had to the war, so now that honor sits on top of her stone that is under the weeping willow tree that we sit in as lovers, looking over the golden waters, and the gazebo of passionate love. When the wind blows the ferns in this immense tree, I can feel her soft warm body molding perfectly into mine, we line up as one being.

Anyways back to Abbie's car accident, it flipped over on its roof there was Kristen, who was only about three at the time still inside the vehicle. It was only through the grace of God she survived that somebody pulled her free. I think this because the door handle was broken- off with force, Kristen was only a baby at the time, she was not given to me...

This person stole her out of the car and then claimed her as one of her children. Jamie Keller keeps her locked up in a chamber that was cold, damp, and dark with only a light bulb from wires under the tin roof tiles. No bathroom, the windows covered up with wood planks, with the smell of shit everywhere in that basement.

To this very day, nobody knows who this evil person was, or what she was all about. It is like she was there and going before anyone got to know her. Who knows if that was her real name, I sure don't?

Until one day... I got one knock on my front door, and by the time I got there, the woman was gone. They are sitting at the doorstep of my granddaughter's. She is now seven years old, there were nude wraps in a blanket in a cardboard box, and I do not know how I would feel if it was the emotion of being overjoyed or horrified?

Kristen had a broken wrist cut, and her fingernails were chewed down to the bone, her eyes bloodshot and tears running down her cheeks, and everything in-between bit up, you could see the human teeth marks.

She was Just left there cold and lonely snow falling on her tiny chest... With a note attached to her neck, saying this is your granddaughter; she is damn responsible now, and I cannot take care of her any longer! To this very day; I have never found this woman, it is like she never existed.

She better hopes that I never do! I may be in the end stages of my seventies, but I can still kick some ass.

For years, I thought my granddaughter was deceased. That was what the wright up in the Coalville gazette babbled along with the police officers said, for seven years this woman would have stomped, beat, slam, and tie-down my grandbaby, to a bed, and twist her feet and limbs until the bones would crunch, and her heels would be where her toes should be.

Without even knowing that she could have gotten away, but because she had a fear of wrath she never attempted. It is amazing how someone can brainwash some that are young. What can a little girl do to deserve this?

So, what could I do? I was not going to leave her out in the cold, plus how could I resist that adorable little girl? She always did have a way of melting my heart, and I guess always will. It would not have been for this little girl I would have given up on a life a long time ago. Now that she is nearing the age of seventeen, she does not need me as much as she used to; I guess that my mission in life is over. Life goes by like a blink of an eye.

I did the best I could, but I often wonder if my best was good enough. But I often wonder if she is going to be the next seventeen-year-old girl on the list of heartbreak.

The only hobby I have as I get older is looking at the scenery that surrounds me, looking over the gazebo that cascades a reflection on the pond along the walkway. Stumbling back and forth for the kitchen, I mumble in whispers, to the voices, while trying to write my fragmented thoughts down on paper, as they rush in my head faster than I can scribble with my pencil.

whispers I can hear, whispers I can feel, whispers the used to give me a thrill, whispers from the ones the kill, whispers that give me a chill, I recall whispers while making love, I hear them whispering from the wings of the dove, even the whispers for the above one. I hear whispers!

The seasons seem to change in the blink of my eye; the house I live in is surely over a- 100 years old, it is a craftsman in its style, nothing fancy just your ordinary house in the middle of the country land.

In this house, I have a gallery of all the photos that made me into the person I am today, some are black-and-white, so they are in color. Then some of them have never been taken at all there in my thoughts...

Those are the ones I missed most because they are fading away, especially the pictures that I never had of me in her, I wonder what she would have looked like as she aged, I wonder if we would have done more thing together, like travel the world, I wonder if we would of have a bigger family, and a son that keeps the name going.

I would have been wounded if the curse of seventeen had even happened if only I could go back in time. I wonder why- I lost all my love when they turned seventeen.

One photo is a picture of me standing next to my World War II plane, and another my favorite photograph that is in the center of them all is one that was considered quite risqué for the time, it is a sensual photograph of Olivia looking amazingly sexy she so poured in nature as can be in that stripped-down pose, I used to always have that picture with me, it slightly sticks out of my uniform pocket, and now it is in an old frame.

I kissed the photo so much that I wore a hole on my lips.

Looking down on my gallery, you will see a photograph of Kristen when she was ten years old, a green-eyed girl to this day I cherish, with strawberry blond hair, she was a hell-raiser for her age, just like her grandfather.

Also, until this very day, nothing has changed. She is still a holy terror that lingers in my head. My mind is like a slideshow projector that never turns off, yet the frames snag and twitch in the cogs until it is all distorted.

One of the other photographs that I find unique, and intriguing depicts this very house with green siding and white trim, and the distance along the lane that used to be let by flickering lanterns, those lanterns are long gone... Just to be replaced with posts of modern electric candlelight that some work and some do not, as of now on to old change light bulbs.

Hell, I still have to go over the fear heights... Which sounds ridiculous coming from a World War II pilot? This property is becoming too much for me, I was hoping that I would live long enough to wear my granddaughter and could inherit my empire of dirt, but as of now, it seems like a far stretch.

The house was once part of the working farm in the 1900s. As you can see from the old windmill and horse-drawn plow, sitting in the front yard. I sometimes wonder if the course I have is not for the seventeen-year-old girl named Megan that lived in this house, who hung herself supposedly accidentally in the weeping willow tree in 1917. She was broken-hearted that night, so the story goes because her lover was cheating on her with an even younger girl. The tree was the place Meghan went for her escape.

Somehow, she was going to jump off in the fight, however, the rope got caught around her neck, and she was not found till the next morning. I know this because she has talked

with me too... Now and again, I can see Meghan swing at night in a glowing white, singing the words to 'America the Beautiful.' The song that she was singing that night. Her voice is beautiful, but it is spooky to me. The rope swing that is hanging from the branches is still here, after all these years.

The windmill; yes, it is missing halfwits its blades, yet it still twirls in the breeze, the ancient Watermill is still standing yet decrepit. Oh, how we used to swim around in the pond while the water proud on top of us, we were holding onto one another, saying that we would never let go. That is a French kiss that I long for! She keeps her promise; I do what I believe is right! I am human. I have made mistakes.

Looking at how it is still turning into woe clanking and cracking as the giant goes around. You know I know how it feels; I feel the same way. I would have to say, I love and hate it here, I cannot make up my mind. It is probably the only thing that I still love in my life other than my granddaughter, but it is all dead, and that is what I hate the most! Just like the curse of seventeen, will it die at pace, or will it live on?

The treehouse was where I and Olivia played as children and learned the defenses, between me being a boy and her a girl, Olivia was amazing to me even then.

The house was made by the Janz family, the dad made this house for his little girl named Meghan. This was her spot but in her time. The treehouse is about 47 feet off the ground and has a swing.

From the porch, you can see the hayfields for miles, and that was when I had her hand for the first time, I would say she was about the age of seven. Looking at it now not much has changed, the spring steep still wraps around the trunk, the wood and rope bridge over 20 feet accursed the trees. It was like a little castle that was only ours when we were kids.

Meghan's name is scratched in the hardwood, along with this poem she wrote. It cries when you read it, but does it mean anything?

The treehouse: If you read this your love will be with you forever. The dwellings that our love began where we became more than just friends. The place where you took my soul, the place you made me your fool. The treehouse tells the story of you and me, and how you made me cry.

This is the place where it is all going to end, and so will I. Without love, it is all going to die. This is my time to say goodbye, and I will make sure that any couple that comes in here will always be more than a friend, even if life ends. Your soul is with mine, at this time, there is nowhere you can hide, for she and I will always be at your side.

All of this is a part of me, and it is going to go to the grave with me most likely, as I know that Olivia will never let go, now or ever. And the lands dissolve into nothing but dust, and rolling hills will end up with no memories, other than our given stones with the names chipped away from old age.

Just as the sun is going to burn out, my fire is fading just like the heat for a summer's day from the past, so why live at all, if you do not have love, you do not have any worth living for, and having this type of love has been killing me slowly for years, I have been dying since she was seventeen.

Generally, every day at its end I sit, and in an antique chair and stare out the window and watch as the world goes by. And I think, and I think... to the point that I am probably going to end up with dementia.

I find myself laughing in my head for no reason, and then becoming incredibly sad as I think about the life I had. Sad to think that she never really had much of a life and neither did



Abbie either. I would give up everything I have to bring both of them back.

I remember my first date, some would call it quite bland in today's state standards, but that is just what we did back in those days, we used to walk along the railroad tracks, and watch the stars... And the many galaxies, we used to play chicken with the oncoming steam trains. And lock lips under the moonlight, my first kiss was not until my thread date.

My second date with Olivia was at the ancient weeping willow tree with the swing; we would climb the tree and sit holding hands. Maybe that was when the spell started, I do not know.

Maybe it was because of Megan? Maybe she was the one that did this to me, maybe not, either way, I still wound why, who, and when.

My third date is the one that is still vivid in my mind, it was in a gazebo that is on my property now today, we walked along the lovely white bridge that links the walkway across the waters on the pond to the structure itself, and that is when things, was supernatural, there is no other word describe the touching the feeling, the thrusting.

All the emotions coming together at once, we made love under the scarlet, black skies.

We were attached forever from that movement. We could hear the wave hitting the side of the land, which swayed and voyaged in the moving waters, which splashed against the gazebo frame.

You can smell the mist, I can still smell her perfume, for some reason it reminds me of strawberries. I am sure if that is right or not the right at all, but that is what I compare it to. Just

like our love that was left inside an awareness, it can be washed away, the waves remind me of her coal-black hair lying in layers puddled on the wood plank flooring of the gazebo.

We were like the one in the twilight breeze, and it seemed as if our bodies were floating on top of the glassy pond on which we were on. Now that breeze brings me to my knees, as I scream the words, 'WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO ME!'

Who would I know that Abbie was in the making that night? I had no clue, back then you had one move and one style. Nowadays you must be an Olympian just to get the job done. That takes all the romance out of the state of affairs.

Let us not forget to mention in those days you did not put shrink-wrap on it or have and have a plan of getting rid of it... you went against the odds, and fate would take place or not, you had to think about what you were doing. I was thinking at the time I do I want this, and I am going to live with it no matter what happens. I did not care at all really; I was truly in love with Olivia, so I lived with the consequences, and I got a new life in my life but only for seventeen years.

Part: 7

Confidential

I will never forget Olivia saying, I know you want me! Like I want all of you, I want to, I need to taste you, feel you inside me, and I know that you have been dreaming about me since we were little. Besides, you know you want it. I recollect saying I feel the same way about you. I remember her swallowing down hard, and saying I want to do this more than you even know and gasping at the words. Of course, I have dreamed of this moment with you.

Olivia said that she fantasized about me when she was about eight years old, every night to the point she could not sleep at night. She said that she would lick her fingers and reach down and tickle herself until her fantasy would peak with a thrilling squirting spray that drizzled all over her bed sheets. She still looks at me as I sleep. Anyways she said that gave her worth and satisfaction, within her body and mind. Afterward, her dreams would begin as she would be relaxed into a deep slumber holding her teddy bear as if it were me.

That night in the gazebo, she was so wet down there and so tight, she pulled my pants down so fast the button zipper was like a stone on top of the pond. Her breasts shined in the moonlight, and her nipples were pointed as if they were looking at me as we were doing it, staring at me sweetly; just the same as she was during the whole time, everything on her was bouncing up and down as well as around. Her hips smacking into mine, she said that she loved me on top of her, and she wrapped her arms around me.

I had never felt anything like this before in my life when I entered, we lost our virginities to one another. I will never forget her eyes rolling, the sounds she made, and the faces she made from passion, it still takes my breath away.

We went for about two minutes; she was moaning the words like. And I can hear that same moaning every day. But back the words were like 'Oh yes, right their baby.'

I will never forget awards she began to cry so hard that that droplet of blood would run down her sweet little face, so I just held her in my arms all night, until she fell asleep with her hand on my chest. She said she likes to listen to my heartbeat. Naturally, that was one amazing summer.

I remember sliding down her pink panties that night and sliding her dress up and off her petite little figure. I remember

her fingers touching me everywhere, I remember putting my fingers in places I had never had them before.

She made me tingle and still does. She was so gorgeous when she was looking up at me; well, she was on her knees. But nothing ever compared to her legs spread out before me, she had one of the savory flavors of strawberries.

Those are the nights that I will never forget even this old mind can forget that. The nights that are love ignited and never snip apart and yes; it is still going strong. I could never think of another girl this way ever again. She was the first, my first love; my first in everything, all this happened before she was seventeen, and she was the first ghost that embraced me.

Who would have thought my first time would be my only time with her, yes is the only one that I have loved in my life?

I have gone most of my life without now because there is no other girl I want to relate to. It is more than just a collection of bodies; it is the mating of hearts and souls as well and I do not want us to ever end that bond. Besides once you make these connections they can never be broken, you always remember your first, and they hold something sacred to you and yours that you and she will never forget. It would never be the same if it never perishes.

Nothing has even given me the slightest interest afterward; once you get it, you want more from the same person over and over, for a whole summer's break that was all we did, we christened that gazebo every night, buying hearts and souls.

Besides now is beside the bond always and endlessly until the end of all time. As you know my heaven with her all ends, and my hell begins.

There was nothing more exhilarating than the thunderstorms, the pouring down rain, you know that everything is better when gone! She would claw her nails into my back to the point of my back bleeding. As I crested her seventeen-year body as lightly and softly as possible; yes, I have scars to this very day, just like a permit tattoo of devotion.

This is one reason I am not able to let go; I loved the love that she had for me and that she gave to me.

So, does that make any sense? It is just what happens to come to mind now and again. That I have the marking of seventeen on my back, you can still see it today and oddly it looks like the number seventeen.

Just like Olivia's spirit that follows me everywhere I go, yes- she is still in contact with me every awakening hour of the day. Even though she is no longer alive on this planet we can still communicate, like a telegraphic power, I can hear whispers along with others that I have adored.

After I gave this letter to her, I knew that my life would never be the same again. I did not know if that was a good thing or a sad thing, it was just the way it had to be at the time.

It was not what I genuinely wanted, plus I had never been away from home. I have never been more than ten miles away from my hometown of Coalville.

I have never been away from her loving arms and soft warm body all my life. I knew that I was going to miss her, her personality, her ways, and hear everything.

My attention goes back to these days often because she pulls at my heartstrings like a gutter being tuned too tightly. That she likes to play in my ears now and then. This happens to

the point that I feel as if I am going to choke on the wood splinters.

I remember the first time we met; I was in the first grade. We were in a one-room schoolhouse that had all eight grades in one sitting arrangement. She was crying because of separation anxiety-tears of blood because she had to walk to school in freezing rain and snow. I was the only one there that cared to know how she felt?

I tried to make it okay for her, from that point; you know I had a crush starting then on her that never seems to subside. I was going to do whatever I could to be there for her no matter what. Why I do not know if she was unlike anyone or anything that was in my life, at that time I was mesmerized it was love at first sight.

Still, the ice had been broken for us and we became friends. Artwork and creativity can open all kinds of doors, even the one to the heart... she made a drawing that impresses me so much that I still have it. It was a drawing of a girl sitting on a swing with a big tree in the background; it was wonderful, beautiful, and yet spooky.

She was just what I was looking for in my life. We were the love that we needed that we both never had before in our young lives. We brought joy to one another, just the same as we do even now. What more can I ask for?

I remember- all the classes and sitting behind her wanting to touch her hair, because it looked so soft, and looking at her backside, I felt high just by being in her presence, and smelling that scent that was uniquely here and never changed.

Speaking of that drawing, it was breathtaking— you can see it is hanging in that frame over there on the wall, it is

yellowing now from old age and tattered in its look, but I still have it!

I remember- that I made a comment at the time, and she gave it to me, and that is we things started to work out for me like never before, but just me being a boy I had no clue what I was doing, but I knew- I wanted more. But was all this a blessing of a lucky streak or not?

Either way, it is going to last all my life and never end, yet it ended all my other chances forever!

Yet her spirit- is like a snowstorm in December cool and lonely, yet beautiful like a fall day and berth taking in the memory of thinking about the days we had together in the summer before the first stage of failure.

After the war, my injury stopped me from working in the coal mines, something is thrilling about working seven miles on the ground, in total darkness. The coal mine was not the job I wanted, but it was the one I had that paid the bills.

I remember the coal mines walking to that cage of a shattered dream; you can see the conveyors and lights in the deserts along with the stars, which are glowing in the midnight skies to not become exposed for hours. Yes, only to end up with blackened lungs, to make a working man's play for the family that I have.

They drop us down that hole, and it feels like your lunch is going to come up into your mouth. You snap that light on, and you remind yourself that if there is a rockfall that you will never see your loved ones again.

Bouncing along on the mantrip, to get off and start the day, that seems to never end. That shaft is so low that you are always bent over, water runs down your slacks constantly. You

feel like you pissed yourself. Oh, being six miles down and six miles out is bone-chilling.

Having a respirator only plain sucks, so I hardly ever have one on my face, I just chew gum; all I have to do is think about what I am leaving behind if I do not for some reason make it back home. She and the little one knows that I love them. But could they live without me? Yet we know that they would be protected.

Part: 8

Thank you, Next

(Past)

I never really wanted to live a day without her next to me, I remember how we used to go to this little amusement park that still has the old standing to this very day aside from the friction wood roller coaster built in 1902.

It has these big old comfortable train cars that sit two in the front and two in the back, they rattle back and forth on the track, but we loved it because you could not help but bump into one another's hips and put your hand on each other's knees and legs. Back then everything was done by hand; like pushing the car on the chine to go up the lift hill of 41 feet, and to stop was done by a man that would pull on a handle, to have the brakes grind the train car to a halt when coming into the station.

The costar next to the lake has a top speed of 17 miles per hour not fast but it was romantic for its day, on this coaster was the first time- I put my arm around her and we became more than friends, that last leap you get airborne, and get to snuggle your love and squeeze what you like.

We still ride this coaster now and then, but with Kristen, and Olivia hovers above us.



About every Kristen and I sit down at the dining room table, and I tell her stories of back in the day. We have the same meal of canned soup, canned peaches, and Pepsi in a can. I have not had a home-cooked meal in years.

Every morning I have peanut butter and jelly sandwich doubled over, a cup of black coffee with three spoons full of sugar that is so strong it could walk, it makes my cough go down, then I start popping the pills that keep me going. I have not slept in a bed for years; I sleep in my chair in the living room.

The bed has never been used; the sheets have never slept in the bed and have a canopy in soft purple just the way she always wanted.

Why, you ask? Because that was the bed, we planned on being in together. She grew up with a mattress on the floor, and only had one blanket, and a teddy bear that I gave her. She was lucky to have a pillow, times were trying during The Great Depression.

I remember as a kid my dad giving me a packet of old bread with coffee on top and that was all I got in the one-day meal. Olivia's mom before she died made her dresses out of floral flower bags. So much wind and dust, no one can believe it unless you lived it, yet we had one another.

Television did not come out until the about 1950's, and it was snowy as hell, shit you only had one channel and had to get off your ass to turn it on and off, plus it went off the air at midnight.

Everything was on the radio, and back then, or You talked to your neighbor about your day and what was going on, as well as sit on the porch at night. Not like today at all!

## Part: 9

### NY

I remember my dad telling me about this new highest building in New York that was just compiled, and that was The Empire State Building. Think about that I and Olivia planned to see it, along with the Statue of Liberty, but it never happened.

I must pop pills now; I do not know if any of them do anything. They make me feel like I did in the 1960s. My mind starts thinking and it takes me back. They say I should not have a drink now, because I am on so many medications, but I do not care anymore.

The only thing that could happen is that I would die, hell that would be a good thing. Put me under the tree next to my lover, I have lived too long now, 80 years is too long without love. Yes, I am 92 years old and still kicking, just not as high.

I think of when she and I were about 10 years old, she used to ride sitting on top of my handlebars on my pulled bike, going down the hill as fast as we could, having her hair blowing in my face. I can still hear giggling in my ears while she would say go faster... faster!

I remember this one-time way back when I had what it took to get another girl that was in the 1960s. Hell way not everyone needs what is real to feel consoled.

Sometimes, you must stray away to know what you love in life, that is what it is all about.

Life tip If you stay in one place too long life gets old fast, I hope before you get old, or start to have doubts.

It is just like the footprints in the snow, sometimes you see two sets, and sometimes not. Now and then you look back

on the path you made that is your life, and only see it on set. However, they are not yours, so I have come to realize that is when I was carried through the hard or difficult times.

Did I have to get another lover? Well, is that up to you to figure it out? Just remember it is not always what you do that stops you from what you wanted in life, it is something or some that are there and pulling at you!

Furthermore, afterward, you look back on life and think, I should have done this, or I should have done that, do not waste your time. It is all meant to be even if you cannot foresee it.

The journey is not always clear, however, I always got where I wanted to go, I remember a time when I had an opportunity to find love again in a living form. On the other hand, I would hear the voices calling out say 'Listen you do not need to talk to her okay. Do not try to ask her on dates or anything.'

Life tip- You need to make yourself a lesson to what you want to hear even if it is difficult to move on. Life is a fight for what you want. If you want it, you are going to have to corroborate and let go of the past. Love is just like fighting in a warplane, your ether- got- shot down, or you have someone else firing a bolt at you. Either way, it always ends in a climaxing explosion, it is just how it is going to come about in the end.

I think this... about the voices, you do not have control over what I can and cannot do... so shut up, please. And the voices say to me...

'No need to talk to her.' Well, I say- I can talk to whomever I want, and you are not going to stop me. Over the years, I have come to see it is not a true relationship if the person is afraid of what they can and cannot do.

Just because it is the way it is now, does not mean shit. All relationships are going to end naturally or not, it is all up to you and what you want. I choose to stay in this relationship forever, and doing it is too different sometimes.

Just remember you have chosen, so are you going to become afraid? So, are you going to listen to your inner voice?

The voice that follows you is the one that you choose to listen to, there is a good one, and evil ones just recollect that statement, and you will see that it is true.

Kristen- I live with my grandpa; I am all he has at this point, I know that he was a good man, but he is a little too guppy for his good.

Brandon- Kristen has a very high-pitched squeaky voice, that is so cute, and unlike any other girl I ever knew. Her hand can fit into the palm of my hand, her giggling laugh is the only thing that warms me and feels the emptiness in the space of my heart, just like a snare drum. I am not so hollow when around her. She just has a way of making my day complete. Without her I would not have any beat or cadence to play, she is a rhythm to my melody.

She just like Olivia was at that age so cute ... with her braces on her teeth and the way she looks at me. When she wakes up to me, I sometimes find it hard to speak because she looks so much like her.

I remember Olivia had a summer job at the 5 and 10 where she made five cents an hour while standing on perfect little feet. Back then you had to be nice to the people in the stores, besides, ask them if they needed help with anything.

Now it is like they are doing- a favor for you just to get checked out. 'Get your shit and get out.'

Anyway, back to my story, so I used to go in there and talk to her at the cash register, that magic spot for flirting together. The perfect girl, what can I say?

Kristen, she was a lot like you! Blue eyes and so damn sweet, back then she was all I wanted to do was run to her. But instead, I had to walk out the door. Just remember this: ``True love should not be such a game; you need to feel the same.'

I do not remember, said Brandon; it will come back to me in flashes... Kristen asked; so, where do you consider being places for romance? Brandon- Romance does not exist do not kid yourself, honey.

YES- yes, it does say, Kristen, how is that said, Brandon?

Brandon- you cannot have romance if you are not in love.

Kristen- Okay I remember the first-time having sex in the restaurant man's bathroom! On the fool with me on top... oh god!

I do not need to know that said Brandon, that not Romantic that is rap. You are not even seventeen yet, that shit should have been a secret to only and perish to you and saved for marriage! At least love the guy.

Oh, papa you are so old fashion said Kristen, yes maybe so whispered, Brandon ... However, in my day we would have not even thought about doing such a thing, with being in love.

So, has this guy ever asked you to marry him? Yes, but not whom you would expect, I do not think that I loved him. You're right, I should've- loved him, all we are is just friends with benefits.

Though I do not think that being romantic is not dead today, it does exist. You just need to be with the right guy, who can show you what real expressions of love are!

Brandon- enough of this babbling... back to my story. Yes, she is still in high school, and I am six years older; but age is just a number- right? I guess said, Kristen!

After Kristen goes to her room at night I look out my window in the summer, and my wondering eyes overlook the honey golden lake that splashes as the sunlight flashes and shines my life before my eyes in one blink as the sun sets, and the darkness comes to let me know that I am sitting here in my home alone, thinking that on this very lake we had our the first kiss on the bridge that is along the walkway to the gazebo.

The sight of beauty is worth beholding forever even if it only exists in my memory as it once was. Look at this house, look at the life I have had, what does it stand for... what?

What do you think it stands for Kristen? Kristen said I do not know yet you have not said anything yet that makes any sense to me, but that is okay I still love ya!

In 1944 I did not know what to think. Yes, no, maybe? Someone give me a sign or something? That was what I was thinking Kristen if you learn anything from this story is that man- are damn stupid, when it comes to being smooth around a crush. It is like every song is about her; everything you see is not as good as her... do you know what I mean? Love is the heart line that is simply happy when you least expect it.

Back then it was not about friends approving of us even being together like it is today? I know some of them may, and then again how do I know what they might say, hopefully, it is all good. Back then everything about a girl was a mystery. Not

like the days, it is like everything is given away in an instant and that is the end of innocence.

The conversion was light-hearted and modest.

Nevertheless, it was a remarkable achievement; looking back at how complete it can be, you had to wait a week before even knowing that your letter got back home, or if it would be returned to the sender, and I got most of it back because of her dad.

It should be that cupid's arrow strikes at a most unlikely time, and you may realize that they have been in front of you all along. That is what love is all about, a relationship that will change you in many ways for the better. It is a time when a new relationship looks like it is about to deliver on the promises that came with it. Life may never be the same again without them.

So just to let her know that I am even there even now that is what I call love. Wishing her goodnight and sweet dreams even throw her not here and have to see what the next day brings just like she is beside me.

So back to my story Ha! Will I guess as of now I know I am going to call this the curse of seventeen?

Oh, yes, to be under the spell of a girl is like getting hit below the belt. When you have a love like this, it is going to be like instant nausea.

To know that she is going to be the only one that I can love, but the one in need to love, even if she does not love me anymore in this life... She is it... the one, the only... the seventeen dream that now haunts me, that teases me, that toys with me and plays around in my dreams and my day-to-day activities.

That reminds me that I am all alone in my old age, with seventeen black cats, and Kristen has grown up too fast.

Oh, I field to mention that Kristen's mother Abbie was only seventeen at the times she died, and she haunts me just the same but only at the graveyard, however, Olivia spirits swarm in my brain and around my mind constantly, and their past life rushes through my veins.

She speaks and talks to me in whispers, to the point I collapse in exhaustion from being overwhelmed with emotions.

Kristen's father does not speak to me he can burn in hell for what he did to my daughter. Yet all these spirits are like a snowstorm in December cooled and lonely, yet some are beautiful and breathtaking in their memory.

Just like thinking about Olivia back in the days we had together before the first stage of failure.

Ha, I am getting a vision, oh yes- I remember this day, Kristen came here, and let me tell you about this story.

Legend has it- Jamie Keller was out in her yard during a storm digging graves for her seven children, and she was killed by the underwire in her bar by getting struck by lightning. I have no clue if this is true or not, but she needed to find out if it was real.

Kristen remembers the seven girls, two of them tweens, I can remember their names, but I can feel their discomfort. This woman is in hell now, for what she did to Kristen and her kids.

That reminds me that finding someone else to love is like me putting an elevator in the old shit house outback. It is just not going to work now or ever. I knew that your great-



grandfather had problems with Kristen but who could have foreseen what he did to Olivia, your grandmother.

I later found out her dad used to keep her locked in a room, like a dog locked in a cage, she was like a puppy that had her snout hit too many times with the newspaper.

This girl was broken mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, the more evenly she went mad because I was not there for her. The sick ass hole would come into her room and look at her and stroke her as she would sleep. She had to always sleep with one eye open. But that did not stop what happened.

I remember some night when she was little, she would climb outside the window of her dad's house, by picking the lock with her hair clip and climb down the trellis that was littered with roses in the summer night; in her nightdress, just, because she said that she was lonely for me.

But I now know that was not the only reason. And just like that she would be standing in front of me, she would take off her night top and place it on the rocking chair that was agent to my bed, and then she would crawl in with me, and hold on to me so tightly, she was suffocating the life out of me. Little did I know that is exactly what she was doing?

She always fell asleep resting her head on my chest, she must have felt safe in my arms. That is why she was always so tired because of him, that is why she loved me, I was always there for her, and after everything, she went through. Plus, she said that she liked to hear my heart beating. Back then there was nothing more I ever wanted to be than was her hero!

Just like the one night, I noticed that her legs and inner thighs were all cups up, she said that it was because she was out on the river in her yellow rowboat, and it capsized.

She said- 'you know that I can swim very well...' and that the rocks were sharp. I did by a word of it. I knew the markings on her legs were done with a razor blade or a dull knife. She never wanted me to ask about it again... so I didn't.

That night she told me about the time that she nearly drowned when she was seven years old. Back then I had no idea that her dad was holding her down under the water in the bathtub by her hair, and that was the first time he laid his hands and fingers on her.

To this very day, I could slaughter that man for what he did to my lovely seventeen- girl. But by the time I got back from the war he was on the ground. Nonetheless, that did not stop me from pissing on his gravestone! That may be Kristen's great-grandfather, but I have no respect for the man, and neither will she... nor will.

Part: 10

Golden

All we ever had was the gazebo on top of the golden water, with my seventeen-year-old lover; the blue eyes shekel into mine lost in time. Tell pasture grasslands blowing in the breeze, kissing her would bring on our knees.

The flowers bloom all around in the spring, the trees with colors that display their majesty just for us. Leasing to her sing in my ears added to all the lust, she was whispering sweet nothing that

I can still lightly hear.

I was the only one she could trust, being together was necessary for both of us. No matter what the weather, our love was forever, and ever, I will remember.

Her hands that I loved to hold, the story that we told.  
We said that we were together even when we got old. Just like  
that song

‘Remember When’ would be the story of our lives. That  
is, we would have bands of gold, and someday it is our baby to  
hold.

I forgot about this, but she would sing to me, she had  
the voice of an angel!

You know that Kristen looks and sounds just like her... I  
do believe that reincarnation is possible?

So, I gave Kristen all the poems I wrote to Olivia  
because she would hide under her pillow anyway, plus now they  
have been made into songs that Kristen plays for me on this old  
piano that sits here in the living room.

Speaking of interments to this day I still have Olivia’s  
1920’s guitar, the wood is now cracked, and the high E string is  
broken, it it will never play a song in tune again, but I do not  
have the heart to throw it away, it was played with love and  
compassion by her.

So, I plan on giving it to Kristen so that we can get it  
working again if I have the energy. It is on my to-do list! A list  
that gets longer as my days are getting shorter.

You know it is like me when I look out my window, I can  
still see her out on that boat just floating the day away.

Yes, that was one of our hobbies that we would like to  
do.

Going out on the water and embarrassing one another  
until it was so back out that we could not see the dock any  
longer. All we could see was the lights and reflections flickering

in the water, which was so picturesque and tranquil, it was fairytale-like.

From the gazebo, that was the creation of everything we were at the time. We had the perfect elements for love, a forbidden lovers' equestrian on the water of time that seemed to ever steal when locking as one.

On the other hand, in our fairytale there were many dark storms, that the father caused, he was going to end it at all costs, even if that met heartbreak and torture.

In addition to that, he said that I was the one that did all those twisted things to his daughter, and that is why I listed in the Army, I had to leave. There was nothing I could do but hand her my note.

Nothing that I could do or say again; because- I never saw her again after that. All I had was notes that never got to her.

I remember- in the summer, my wandering eye overlooks the honey golden lake that splashes, as the sunlight flashes. My life shines before my eyes in one blink as the sun sets, and the darkness comes to let me know that I am walking back to my home alone.

Thinking that on this very lake we had our first kiss on the bridge that is along the walkway to the gazebo.

Part: 11

Lifetime

Look at this house it is the home we always wanted to have together, look at the life; I have had what does it stand for... what? What do you think it stands for Kristen? Kristen said it shows that you cared! Yes, said Brandon, that is true love.

Back to them Hope and her love- Nevaeh's talks about her life and the ones before.

1944, I do not know what to think? Yes, no, maybe? Someone give me a sign or something that has happened? That was what I was thinking Kristen if you learn anything from this story, it is like every song is about her everything you see is not as good as her... do you know what I mean?

Love is the heart line of happiness. With that kind of flat-lined something is going to snap, and it did.

Just to let her know that I am even there. Oh, just too able to be with her for a couple of days again in life. There is a date on the way to the end of my life. While Kristen is getting less, we will talk about it all tomorrow, get some rest.

It is interesting that when Kristen is asleep, I check in on her often. You know there is nothing more comforting than hearing her snoring away, she is so adorable! I do this for two reasons that I have a tough time sleeping at night. Two that I want to make sure that she is still breathing because I do not think I could take another loss.

My heart is just too weak, and she is the only one that I love left in my life. I look around the room, and the white laces on the windows are tied back, with lavender ribbons.

I know that she is content, holding her teddy bear under her canopy bed. She may be seventeen in two weeks but as for now, she will always be my little girl.

The crystal chandelier is dimmed as low as it can go, with a soft glimmering creamy warmth.

So now that I know that everything is okay, I shut the door keeping it cracked slightly. I will shuffle my feet back down the staircase, make my way back to my old chair, which is in the

living room. Then stare out the window at the pond and gazebo until the sunrise.

I remember my saying to me when I was a boy, 'Early to bed and early to rise, she'll make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.'

My mother used to tell me every night; I still try to believe that it is so. Nonetheless, I cannot help but scratch my head and question these questions. Just because one is wealthy does not mean that they need to be a d\*ck to everyone that has less. Just because one is healthy does not mean that they cannot become deathly sick, that saying just does not work for me.

Not too many out there know what it is like to have a seventeen-year-old transparent ghost in all white in your face being playful and animated all the time. Even when you take my glasses off, she shows up in your face as clear as day. It makes it hard to slumber throughout the night.

Why; because you are going to realize that you are all alone when you're not alone. That even the dreams that you have are just as painful as being awake.

Not painful as being injured or cut, but as emotionally and psychologically difficult, and it is straining on the old brain to grasp.

Just like a Chicago song; she was my inspiration, Kristen she is now what gave me my life mining, and she is the only thing that gave me any feeling, I am just an empty body.

'Before I go to the place of no return, I remember that I had to live in a land of gloom and utter darkness.' So true, I do not fear the unknown anymore. 'For though I should walk in the center of the valley of death, they have comforted me before so

maybe it will have to be my turn, even on earth the spirits are with me, I will fear no evil anymore.

Part: 12

Nibbana

Olivia is from the paradise above: I would say that she is looking over me, she comforts me as much as she can. But then it is hard not having her here, in her earthly body. It can be hard having faith in something that cannot be expressed in words.

But it is just something that you can feel, like the rain on a warm spring day, like the blossoms from the pear trees landing on your shoulders as a walk down the path to the gazebo, like the haze from the golden water; it all reminds me of Olivia when she was my seventeen.

I still go to the same church that I have going to all my life, and I give what I can. I sit in the back, with Kristen by my side; she is the only youth there. Faith has gone away. I have a pad for all my sins, and that is what I want Kristen to know, always to always do the right things. To think before you do something because you may just have to live with it, or it all life and it stays with you forever.

I can hear her whispering Paul, Paul- I am still with you, and I love you, I love you, Brandon! It is drawn out, and sweet, soft, and lingering. It makes the hair on my arms stand up. Yet it is stimulating and yet melancholy at the same time. Kristen must think that I am going loopy... ha- well I am old; she thinks that all old people are irrational.

Hell, I was the same way at her age... saying that 'I hope I will die before I get old.' Who used to say that good shit, well I cannot remember... who? I have seen a lot come and go in my life; I just wish I could remember all of it, like Woodstock.

All I remember was mud all over all the nude people, it smelt like shit, and Jenny Hendrix was playing the star-spangled banner, which was astonishingly weird. All good musicians die young. Life comes and goes just like a hit song, and once you get sick of the riff, and the fame that is when it is all over. The same can be said about existence!

Here is one of the notes that I fished: Thinking about her and the summer and what it could be, with her it reminds me of Seventeen- you are on my mind all the time and I think about you, yet we are not together. The stars shining combined with ribbon holding hands forever you are my eternal love.

Part: 13

Memory forfeiture

Me freaking out video being the top room, on MFC! ≈  
Past remembers of Karly... ≈

Sometimes I get so preoccupied trying to perfect everything that I forget to appreciate the things that are already perfect. Like, have you ever been in love with a girl that you cannot have in your life?

My mind is achy half on and half off, most of the time. A lot of my dreams are the true reality, so it seems to me, then when I am awakened, I am frightened by what I do not see, and curious about what I do.

In my life, I try to put these thoughts and moments down into a story. And this is what I am telling you. What I am saying right now is to wonder if it even makes any sense. But this was my true reality, a tragic love story... That did not end, the way I wanted.

There is one thing that is on my mind, and that is Kristen's so-called boyfriend, he drives up in a piece of shit car,



honks the horn three times, and my sweet innocent granddaughter goes running out the door in a short skirt, to him like he is the only guy in the world. Jayson Parker in the ass hole that deflowered my little girl.

I can't stand them; he is a cocky blue bald punk. You know when you take a girl out you should meet her at the door of the home and walk her to the car and open the damn car door for her. If I would have done that back in my day... God, you would never hear the end of it. It's just not right.

Not only that but he expects her to pay for the date, the food, or whatever they do. Plus, then he wants to bump and grind on her too. God-talk about selfishness, yet she thinks he is the only one with one in his trousers.

So, I told him- 'I have bolt cutters out in the shed, and I am not afraid to use them; that is what Jayson said to Jayson'. Then when they get back, they make out in the car, and he kicks her out like she is nothing to them. Back in my day, you walked the girl up to the door and maybe you got a little kiss, your tongue didn't need to go down each other's throat along with other things, it's sick.

I said to Kristen don't throw your life away but that is what is going to do. But you can only talk about someone so much, young people are going to do what they want to do. I was the same way back in the day, ha... but they don't need to know that. It is just my time to move on. And lose another seventeen-year-old girl.

Just to think that my little girl is going to have her seventeenth birthday, it just seems like yesterday that she was born so much has changed scenes then.

All she has to do is say my name and my knees get weak, I am in love, or am I in too deep? What I am feeling makes me want more and more.

But I know that I have to walk out of that door of life. Yet, I know that I can never hold you in my arms forever.

There is always someone in the way or, so it seems. I believe in not saying one negative word so that I can receive my blessings that will and can bring me joy.

My Kirsten is my everything to me, all her blue eyes still shine for me, and Olivia's kisses still take my breath away. Tell me this very day, you are mine and I would not have it another way. Even if I have to eat coal dust, and even if I have lost it all to the hex of seventeen.

Part: 14

Swathe

Video: MFC me nude showing it all for you saying: 'ant- I the cutest!' ~ Past remembers of Karly... ~

So, there is only one more thing to do and that is this. Please do not open this letter until you think it is the last day of your life.

This was the last note she wrote to me.

So, all these years- I have been wording what is in this envelope? Nothing changed how I felt, nor did I do not care. I will open it and read it.

It reads- you will know what happened to me, I never leave you ever. When you burn this note, which is the end of your life. Also, it is the end of me being with you in spirit.

We can finally be together in eternal life, so my sweet Brandon burns this letter, and we can be in love once again.

Olivia after- I left she could take anymore she killed her father with an ax; it was a crime of passion and hatred. And that is the night she made me the love letter that I have in my hand, I never that it was also a suicide letter.

She left her home for the last time, naked as the day she was born, and laid down on the railroad tracks waiting for the next train to run her over. It was over...on her seventeenth birthday. And my life was empty of every sense, but I did not know how it happened all these years.

Her spirit may be with me, and it may hunt me, but it is nothing like having that worm seventeen body next to me. Never to kiss those lips again to hear her voice again, and never hear her laugh again.

All I have left are some crumpled-up photos in a letter of abandonment. All I can say is I hope that we both end up being in the heavens together once more. Just remember do not let your dreams go with you to the grave.

It is time to burn this note! Brandon's last berth on earth and first in the heavens... There she was the same as the last time I saw her, seventeen a glowing but this time she is mine forever, now that is love. Kristen, this is the story of a seventeen-year-old girl, the love of my grandpa's life.

The man was the rock in my life too. I found some of his notes and enjoyed his story so much that I need to write them down in this book.

I never knew that what he was telling me over the years was all true; I made him the promos to publish this story so that he could always be remembered.

For love, he had for the one that never left his side. All I can say is that the curse of seventeen went to the grave with him, so I believe. For that reason- I am still here, and I am now seventeen.

Yet, he is still with me in spirit.

Interval: 5

Crescent Moon

Chapter: 8

The Confusion?

Karly- I got Miss. Cammy girl award, you voted, and I won! ≈ Past remembers of Karly... ≈

2016- Boys today feel that feeling is humping! Olivia always feels absent-minded after the kids come home from school and see her husband after a long grueling day at work. She forgets everything about her day when seeing them, it's the highlight of her day. Even though their day is about to end hers is about to start, she races off without even a hug. Yet that is just me- I have a hectic life. 'Well?' she prompted. She had wanted to save the news, to torture her by not telling, but he had to talk.

~\*~

I read a book that had the first chapter like this- and it oh so reminds me of life and how it is becoming. 2021- 'It was a yearning to burn.' Computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I- pads, and PC's, without looking through old dusty pages, plus its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unpredicted sex. They were

dragging the two women; we saw last night by the hair. I didn't want to look, I didn't want to stare, and I just acted like I didn't care. Both girls were completely bare. Their lives were over. It seemed so unfair.

A girl without a name just a number of hers- I looked at my girlfriend and said and said- we just so two hookers getting whacked and jacked. She said- yeah, I no let's get in the house before they get any ideas about us. There was a thump and a bump in the night, and not the kind of thump and bump you want or want to feel and hear. Honey- hon wake up; I think there is someone in the house! Go and see it!

Wh-a- what? I looked and there was someone at the foot of the bed!

Blood dripping, from her chest, she is scared to look down yet does it anyway. She was thrown around the room by something dark. It wasn't a woman yet; it was a thing it wasn't anything but unfairness. It was unlike anything she had ever seen. But what was it? No face, no name, nobody... what could it be, and what does it want from me? A flash of lightning appeared in the sky, letting her see the gigantic outline of the grim reaper is what I got by them! Doing exercise helps to boost the power energy nevertheless, she could not boost it enough, not enough to escape from the... Things. It was sucking the life out of her with its dark back lips. Slowly closing her eyes, she was with me, in my mind. Yet never alive after that day.

Nothing but impressions of life...

~\*~

Start: 1941- Grandpas Natalie story- he'd remember... been fresh out of high school not a day over seventeen. I had five cents to my name, I was still living at home, but not for long. I was a virgin, to the world! I never saw anything other

than farmland. I didn't know what I was in for. Yet I had to go... Hitler was taking over, killing babies, and baring them alive of all things. I will never forget the sounds of the troop train steaming through, dropping off more maggots like me to kill the Nazis'.

Knowing that ninety percent of them would not make it back home. I never thought I would live this long, and I never thought young-ins would doubt the war and the Holocaust.

I have seen men, women, and kids being lined up on their knees and shot in the back of the head, for no reason at all. It's incredible, tragic, and despicable, how one man's loathing can start so much destruction. I do believe that history is going to repeat; it's just a matter of time. I just hope I can fish this story with you all before I am fished myself. He had to share it with someone. He put the plate down, came into the living room, and sat on the couch, which meant that all there was more, yet he passed midline.

As I woke up alone this morning, I miss the feeling of last night, the softness of the sheets between my thighs. I look around the room and nothing has changed, she still sleeps next to me, yet she can't see me. Yet I see her, and in a way, I think she can feel me there, yet I am not quite sure... I have been gone for so long now I don't think she even remembers what it's like to be with me as we were oh so long ago. It's like I was never there, but I was there at one time holding her, I'm still there, yet I ask not... I would love to be alive, once more. I could talk to him now, yet I don't want to, for being meanie as she said to me!

He and Diana had nicknamed the Butt. 'It was a bust,' he said. 'Cops came the night of this party.' She watched him carefully.

'Are you sure you want to do this, Marcel?' she said unobtrusively. 'Come on, Diana.' He was annoyed that she'd

even asked. He hoven on her legs into his lap. The message was in order on the back butt and in-between her, the only thing that would keep them from total atrophy, and he still insisted on working her calves every day, even though she'd been saying for a long time that it was useless.

Diana, she had seen a few or more different doctors. And she'd been going to physical therapy for well over a year now. But there'd been no change. No improvement. She'd never walk again. Come on, honey, let's get you ready for bed. I was 13 at the time. I am no special girl here, just a collective girl here doing a thing as I should, thinking of boys and rubbing myself on them in my thoughts at night. I read, I think, I even poop too, throw girls are not allowed to say that right, not in these times. All the way with sweet and common girly thoughts. I've led a common little life. There is no testimonial dedication to me or for me, yet I may be dying of something bad, I can say. Plus, my name Dinia will soon be unable to be remembered by all that was of the past days. But in single deference, I thrived as magnificently as anyone who ever lived a young dumb yet cute life.

Looking good, girl. As I walk the halls of this big creepy place. 'I feel okay today.' Yours truly here feels that she loved another boy with all my heart, and soul body, and mind. My soul and for me, that has always been enough to give to him if that would be his wish.

How's it feeling and doing, hunnie- bunnies? Going to kick it- I keep trying to die, but they won't let me say I am so stinking cute. Well, you can't have everything even if it's fading or living without pain in both.

Immense day today.

You say that every day, with the cutest smile of your little blond-haired blue-eyed face, you little angel. It's a lovely

day outside. Let's take a walk, outside of today, We, don't think so, you're not able to- at all- yet. (Wishful thinking) Well, we've got to get you out of this room. Come on now, honey goes to the playroom and does coloring and things like that. Some fresh air is what I want! Grrrr!

Chapter: 9

fixable

Karly- Video of me running around the room nude ≈  
Past remembers of Karly... ≈ The delusions?

It is all good. I do what I always do, no compacts, -Good morning. Me- I am so sad and sorry at this point of the beginning of my young little life, it is not a good day, to be me I want to play and dance and sing and do-little cute things like painting my toenails to match my Paullieger-ie ones. I have a long sunn-ie dress and not as much hair as I did, but it is fixable if I work for it. OUTSIDE??? I asked if she said- baby- girl- I do not think it can happen. The nurse says- she is up for anything.

Chapter: 10

Ciao

Karly- Photo of me sucking one-off... my dildo that is, for the show ≈

Past remembers of Karly... ≈ The girl?

Hello? (Boy) I like him, he's-a funny and handsome. This is me! Doors fly open as she runs and stops running and stops looking in at the dying kids in their rooms and beds, older boy Saved- he comes to read to you. Read a kiddie story of hope and love and goo-goo-ness, with unicorns and ponies? Yeah- No that pain starts within me and I feel as if I had to run to the bathroom to not keep it down. The treatments are talking to



me; I do not know if this is a good thing-ie. Oh, come on, back to bed, and sleep this off, it goes in OUCH-ies, and her sweet small light goes out.

Ahh... snoring, yet one old Betty said- All right now, that keeps her away for three hours.

(Noon)

Where did we leave off? In the story... Oh, yes, yes, here it is- baby. It was the night of the carnival, a news story this time, I knew yet I did not remember it, I lost something I can feel yet they did not tell me anything so I pulled out what I can, yet that is not much being my age. 'Daved, was there with his friends, and Maraca.' -Daved?

-That's where they both met- they met... It was at the time and date of September- 19th of 14, Dinia was nine years old or so. (Girl) She has the same name as me.

See then there at the park- groundwater squirting game: little girl wins a prize. He tried to get her something yet epic fail! -Foo-ie! I watched that off so hard, no dangling here. - Thank you for playing the boy. Hah, you are funny. I am a man here, not a boy. Man, I clobbered, it is all good she bears hugged him for being just him and that was some time being, cute yet very dumb for the acting of dumbness. I bet that thing, Yakie- funny it did not come off, oh that that thing. I am telling you I did baby; these games are rigged.

Chapter: 11

Time to turn in

The span?

Nighttime before bedtime, hello, it was him I remember some of the stories now, that he said earlier... How are you,

good- feeling good? Howdy, what is your name, U- NO its baby think- hard ...???... I do not think I do- and story time starts for her, as she thinks on. Footstep comes right up here now. Over the knob, certainly. Whoa.

Yes, singing it out in a hum-

-Who's this girl with Maraca?

-Her name's Dinia Samilton.

She is here for the summer with her family.

Dad's is the poorest around, yet she has a cute right good butt for you.

Ha- funny then why haven't you been with her yet?

Walked away to see this girl.

-Hello, Paullie!

-Hi, honey.

Look, I won you a prize, he rips one down from the mouse game as she walks towards him.

That woman was P-O-ed, at the game, yet they walked off with one arm wrapped around.

Paullie- oh, thank you! She giggled without thinking of him and she ran around like the mouse on the wheel of the game.

Osha! A bear- cute- Love! He said Yeah, -sure- kiss me! They did... Hey great, huh I look at Daved like I hooked her?

Chapter: 12

Trendy

What is happening?

Hey Dinia, you want some cotton candy baby-girl? -  
Umm, okay honey. That would be so much fun if your pants',  
someone. Sure, look down there... GOD keep it in there I don't  
want to see it, she said. You only get one chance, teenager. You  
want to dance with me or ride with me, or on me, or something  
like that?

I'm Daved Talhhoun.

SO-o?

-So, it's nice to meet you.

-Dinia, who is this guy?

-I don't know, Daved Talhhoun.

-I would like to take you out.

-Friend! Do you mind?

You cannot sit more than two people in a chair, Daved.

Go out?

-No.

-Why not?

-CUZ- I do not want to.

David, she is with us, so do not chase her away with  
your dumbness, and crap.

Hey Dinia, you want to ride the merry-go-round?

Up down, up-down, Up Down-

They want their love life to go.

-I would love to sugggggerrrr.

They are kissing and feeling each other out in the tornal of love.

-All right the boy said in the 1st seat.

Love is all we need right- the book closes for the night as she falls asleep on him.

(Boy) walks out of the room kissing her forehead and says I never forget you as you did with me yet love and luck do not always go hand and hand.

Chapter: 13

Collective

Photos of my sis, online to at her age, asking like a slut, all over me and my friends. It shows her puss and running come, shot.

When and why?

Reason with me. Please Help me. - Daved Talhhoun.

-What?

Works down at the McDonald's with Paullie age seventeen.

Oh... Did you see he was standing like that god do you think it's- like- oh?

Run up- he dad- like not even one inch away from her face? GOD- what do you want from me? She said not happy, yeah, I saw, said the girlfriend, that's Daved, though. Always doing the crazies, are you at all surprised, not at all I like it, yet I don't, we'll see, maybe, I don't know yet, I girl what can I say.

He even came over to you, like he was going to kiss you and not even know your name first.

Sweet but creepy!

I think he likes you, she said with delight. Yeah, my dad would too. I think nah- for now anyway. Hey what... jerk... as he pulled my hair, saying I was cute. Get off me, I said as he was all wrapped around me going for it all. God older boy- Don't touch me. -Hey! I love you, girl, without a name! - Well, I... ugh! HUM, I thought about him and what I saw there. What are you doing tonight? Hey, you can't do that as she runs off the merry-go-round! As she was there, he almost fell on his tooshie, I'll pay you when I get off, Dan.

-He asked you out-

Yes, he did- I like him- eyes rolled dreamily, both hands flew up on her reading cheeks. Okay, Dan, I'll get- it- oh- off, all right. Get off, Daved, you need to come.... (Girls-What?) Award stop in his yelling words- 'OFF' as it spins around, you need to come- what...? Off. He tripped you're going to kill yourself for her boy!

Daved, cut it out, boy. Now, will you go out with me as he hopped on my hose-ie?

What the freak? - No?

Hey boy, she just told you.

It keeps going around. Rings being tossed in the mouth of the clown.

Lean into it so you do not fall off, it goes, fast.

Why not?

I do not know you at all, and because I do not want to. You do not need to know me to be a 1st date girl. How else do you get to know someone if you do not try first- dates, go by what your friends say?

Daved!

Come again? Would you- GO!

NO! He spoke.

Girl- Well, you leave me no other choice then. Oh, my God gets it in your head and not that one I do not want it.

I am not kidding; I am falling for you.

Daved, stop misleading around.

-What are you doing?

-I am going to ask you one more time, he kisses her on the cheek, from behind. Will you... NOW as he gets up on her and the house, doing things I can say, yet think like a boy. Will you go out with me? Daved, you best come on and stop it.

Girlfriend next one over... my leg is slipping. Then get down and off, you- idiot. That way I am doing if she says- yes. Not until she decides. 'Ah, go on out with him, baby, ' said some old man in the next row.' All right, all right, here and goes down his undies, and then see feel it and push him off, I will go out with you. She knew it was all love she was feeling too. It was up to my butt so- yeah- feel in the blanks here.

Chapter: 14

Who and then what?

What?

Who?

When?

Why?

They?

It?

Some?

Doing it?

No, do not do me any favors if you say yes, he spun out on the floor of the ride.

No, no. Do I want to, yes?

Do you want to?

Did she say Sucking- yes!

Do you want to?

Yes!

Say it again.

I want to go out with you- now.

Say it again.

I want to go out with you.

All right, all right God keep it in your pants!

We will go out.

You think you are so clever, don't you?

Daved, you- idiot! She spoke

She remembers my name- yes!

Girlfriend- That wasn't funny, nope, it's okay hun, I'll take care of this boy soon.

Girl asked- on her deathbed- I remember the girl from the Carnival, right... she was my friend, right?

Do you remember me? I asked with wandering thoughts- of hope.

Yeah, sure, the boy that reads to me, not the boy- what was he called- Mr. Bonner, was it? He looked pickled. How could I overlook the speculations of me wondering though-age? I wanted to clear that up with you, for the reason that I'm categorically regretful about that all. It remained an imprudent thing to do... on that ride, to talk to somebody. But then again, I had God was saying she was my baby angel sent from the heavens. I had to see if I could get her naked before the night was over. To be next to you. I was being so pulled from you. Um... oh, what a saying here, it's nice, so nice! Do you use that on all the barbs?

-No, not all just you hun.

-Right, you're dumb.

I saw you all rubbed up to your little girlie friend what's her name with the brown hair and green eyes.

-What are you doing tonight?

-Could you repeat that? Go out tomorrow night?

What do you say, baby? What about this weekend, stay at a hotel or whatever?

I know what you want. I do not give that to boys.

- Why?

Our date then?

Maybe- she walked away- skipping, and humming show tunes.

I did not even say I would go on that date with you.



The date that you agreed to go on with me.

No...!

Yes, you promised.

You pledged, and you swore it did not.

Sounds good, I speculate the thoughts of yes or no:  
Yeah, for you would have killed me with it behind me if not. I  
changed my mind over time to yes or no, I have to see, maybe?  
Look, I know you get some dirty boys coming up to you on the  
street doing crazy things... I don't know him. Why act as if I do?  
You don't know me now don't you, I know me and that's good  
enough, right?

Chapter: 15

Trinkets

Who did what?

Plus, when I see something that I like, I gotta love it to  
see the small-town charms- ha... I love it. I go... I mean, I go  
crazy for it. Okay, what are you speaking of? Well, you see into  
me, I feel that you do. Oh, you're good at this and you. What  
the Hell-? You're so moral. Certainly not. No, you're getting me  
wrong. You have it all now, yet not me. But you- You're  
something ain't you. You are you ain't nothing bad. You're  
whimsical, fanciful, unusual, imaginative, original, creative, and  
quirky, and I would even give you impulsive and capricious.

Hugh?

I'm not.

You're so stupid, I think I like that...

Chapter: 16

## Emotional

The good and the bad- you are so-o goooooood, I'm mesmerized. I'm not frequently like this, I'm sorry. You make me dumb feeling and acting.

Uh-oh, oh my- like- yes, you are.

I can be amusing if you want... thoughtful, uh, smart, um, illogical, and courageous. And uh... I can be light on my feet. I could be your all and wonder, and magical, whatever you want. You just tell me what you want me to be, and I do that- love. I'll be that for you forever and ever never letting go of you to the day you or me, is not around to say- I love you.

You're CUTEly dumb and love me I see that. OKAY! You win, not smart- I could be that for you too. Come on, let's go for this date, you want to be as bad as me.

What's it going to hurt if we do things after and now? Umm... ah- unh- I don't think as a result so maybe it's okay if I am like you. Fine, what can I do to change your mind?

Dinia, you remember- Daved, don't you? The movie starts with supposition- You'll total and get something out. You unquestionable she's coming for it hard? Lessen, chum, it's all set up. We are meeting her for the late show tonight so back off her.

Look... what did... I tell you what? Come on now and see this movie picture.

Oh, my goodness, it's bad, his hand on mine... I feel more to come. What a happenstance she felt! Kissing him with popcorn, and the taste of butter, and Pepsi, I need to talk to you for a second. He's here! He is sitting on my hand, and the other way around, yes, I remember- Yah.

## Chapter: 17

### Levels

The tell of tells- the tale of my butt plug ha! I am- cute,  
no?

-Come here.

-Paullie!

-Hi.

-You look great.

-Hello.

-It is nice to see you yet again.

-You are too.

-Aw, thanks.

You look great and feel good next to me. She is kissing  
my ear, saying sweet nothings.

You do look great. You look great.

"And I know I look great," said Paullie so could we  
please go see this movie now and hush up?" The show's about  
to start. After you, he asked for a kiss on the lips. You come  
back here, baby. You ain't going to catch me, she runs for the  
water's edge and prattled boats.

Swans all-round them as they kiss in the sunshine, next  
to the old steam train puffing down next to the oak trees and  
picnic tables.

See her as she runs, wild and carefree, in stupid love,  
with such a poor boy.

I'm supposed to catch you! Kiss, kiss, kiss, lip bite, eyes tight, and lashes long on his cheeks. I'm faster than you. 'Nah- you- aint.' 'You- aint- you- aint- you ant!!! Nope, no!' I am wet for you know, just drenched with the water on the edge.

I'll get you, baby girl! I'm going to get... Here I come! Let me love you. You better run fast! And then met slowly in a hug, run and it's falling in love again being apart for that long. Park and outlying past them all that looked passed all the rides too. Love after, after falling madly in love, love, love, la- love. The big wheel in the sky is lighting as fireworks off above and inward. Wait for me, baby girl- I see you there, never about where they are, never- ever apart- I would even sleep with me in the night for I said I was scared, and ran in his bed, held tightly.

(Back on the first date)

Want to walk with me to my house? He did old ways I said- mom will love you for this. Her- what happened? ...In that movie? We didn't even see it. I could not even tell you for sure. Here you go. Thank you for this night we didn't even kiss at the door mom was looking so yeah. What are you guys doing now and then? We giggled and did say anything but the truth.

Even if I was opened up to him now.

Yeah, what's going on with you too? Yeah, that is all...

....???....

Just and movie no more no less- um she now by the look on my face, and the glow your un-flow-her-ed-ness. Mom passed a week after what I have. Do you guys feel it for each other? Yes- yes- we do.

Do you-ah Love each other? Yes- I love him! I love her too. Oh, I get it. Do you guys love each other, THEN HUN? Do

not do anything you are going to regret I would not do.  
Unacceptable, goodbye. All right, all right. Mmm...

That was fun. We are going to do it again. Mm-hmm. I have not seen a movie in ages. Really? Huh-uh. Not meanwhile I was a little kid. Pardon?

Nope-ie, I, uh...what?

I am busy, you know, I do not have that much time do not ya- see. Are you busy? hmm- Mm- I have a very stern agenda.

My days are all planned out even back then, I had to deal with this crap. I get up in the morning... banquet, school day, get it in- here- work on homework here, play some all alone, reading time, bath time and sleep time and do it all over and over and over and over. Math, English tutor, lunch at some point if I can hold it down, music lessons- piano lesson, and that about all they will like me do, TV. It is nice when it works also. And after dinner and blowing it all over- I spend time with my family, for three hours before they go home, and I stay here all alone in this glowing white and cold room, next to my bedmate Sam.

She does do or say much, she has a week to live, and she is five years old.

And then I... I catch up on some reading, she is sawing logs! Wow, stop breathing- um I think about that one hard and then say Nah- do not do that.

Oh, Mom and Daddy see you soon pull through one more day baby.

We decided to pull the plug- so she would not suffer- age ten.

We all gathered around to see her. Everything is over... they look down on the life she never had- yet she has a sketchbook of her short life here. No, not everything is readable- however, it's all there in her handwriting. But the important thing is she was remembered for her. And then everything else, she was not. And that way youth and innocence with young love mixed in. free- and wild to see life fad fast. You get to decide all by yourself to live on or let go? She didn't we did- the hardest thing a dad has to do is she, someone, you love to go- before you. It had to be I would say- it had to be this way. I don't get it either.

Why? God- or whomever why make the plan of killing sweet little kids? Why the hell do you want to do this to me- why? Mom- she never did stop crying. It's been four years now.

I'll always think of you that way. I'll pull you in the morning sun and when the night is new...

I'll be looking at the moon and think of you...

But the first time I ever saw your face... The first time I ever saw your face I'll be seeing you.

Morning, Mr. Talhhoun.

Mr. Talhhoun? Call Dr. Mandite Von and USC, okay? I've got no, I got no pulse anymore- she said. I've got nothing to say, just how I love you and you feel that even now with things gone like even if your heart is new, it feels the same to me and you.

Let them know we are in full arrest.

Call me- on my cell if you can, if you can this evening, I see you tomorrow if I can and you can. All right, we will do this if we can. We talked about this. It's all right now to sleep, and rest now think about your life and how it was. Come on, come

on, sweetie. Okay, yes, come on, let's go. Time to go- It's okay, baby, come on. You know it is.

Just try it not to get her over happy she needs rest not a boyfriend right now, said mom.

Oh, Mr. Talhhoun, you came to see her.

Welcome back, the baby girl sees that you want it through all that. How do you feel? Paulie. Apt as a swindle. Where are you going, the girl at the stand asked? I was just taking a walk, thinking about how- I can't sleep without her. Fine, you know you're not supposed to, it's against the rules.

Yeah, I know. You weren't going for a walk, where were you? You were going to see Miss Dinia again, wasn't yeah? I just got out of the hospital, and I miss her you see.

Mr. Talhhoun, I'm sorry you can be coming in out of her room like that at night, but I can't let you see her tonight. Here and now, you're going to have to go back to your room. As for me, I'm going to go downstairs and get myself a cup of coffee. I won't be back to check on you for a while, so don't do anything foolish- I want to go to do that- I just want to see him if I can-

Hi.

Daved.

Daved.

Hi, Baby girl. I'm sorry I haven't been able to be here to read to you.

I did not know what to do. I was frightened you were not ever coming back to my love. I will continuously come back. What is going to happen when I cannot remember anything to

any further extent? What will you do? I will be here always and ever. I will never- ever leave you. I need to ask you something. What is it, Baby girl? Do you think that our love can be marvelous? Sure, I do the same. That is what conveys you back to me each time. Do you think our love could take us away together even if I go away from you? I think our love can do something we want it to.

I love you.

- I love you, Dinia.

Good night.

- Good night.

I will be seeing you there soon.

I want to show you something the boy said I have. It was hers.

- Daved, what are you doing? As the pages started to show and he read out- to them as he did with her- day in and day out. -What now? She loves to paint.

Yeah? -Mm-hmm. Huh. Most of the time, I have all these drawings shown in here and look over them before seeing her do them going back to the time she did them.

Thoughts bouncing around in my head. Are you okay? Why are you crying? It's all good, I said whipping them away.

(Memory)



Do you want to dance with me? Now? Sure. -Mm-hmm.  
Is the song playing in the background? -Mm-hmm.

I want to fly like a colorful bird- so I don't have to be here and see the world until then and I rush over their heads, are you going to be one-two? If you're a birdie, I'm a birdie. Come on, darling, don't do this to yourself- What are you doing? You need to hear all this, there are things you don't know about us. Don't. Don't! Okay then if you insist. Here we go, reading easily- Okay, okay. We were crazy about each other. Yah, we know- Okay, Daddy- Oh, and Daddy, I love him- she said here in her book quoting her life.

I want to meet her in heaven now. This young man is not going to make it.

Heartbroken he is... Okay. I am okay... Nope... he ain't.  
Good night, Daddy, as she ran to me and left you for a night  
out- of fun and games.

Good night, the first kisses we had- like- like- like- like-  
like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like-  
like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like- like-  
like- like- like- like- like- do you see this?

Oh, that's lovely, dear. Her dream was like a movie- I want a big old porch that wraps around the walkway and a big old entire into the house. We can drink sugary soda and candy... nonstop. Big windows and open doors to watch the sun go down, no shades, like here. Do you promise? This for me? Hmm- Mm, I promise. Yeah! -Where are you going? Is something happening to me?

Here...

Always next to you. Wow... This is the part you all need to hear for sure. What is that dear? Ha-hum? She said- make love to me. Daved. -Yeah?

The old-rick-a-t-ie Covered Bridge I waited for her to say when and where.

Did she say- Daved? Okay, I want you? I want you to- And it all happened... all and everything, which makes a girl a woman. And...?

Did...???... you...?

?... Um...? I know I said, the kiss... I want you to make love to me, she asked once more.

So, I did- we did- it was not easy for me- know what I was doing, and she did not. She said- you're going to have to walk me through this sex like this, it broke, she feels, so did I the kissing lots. Right.

You, all right? -Yeah, it's okay- it's okay. I asked- Did I hurt you? -No, no. Dad said we know... boy we know- it was good she had her magical boyfriend he was you, which was her dying wish, to have love and feel the love. I'm just having a lot of thoughts, of age and things. It's Okay! I should go- over this I feel... No, I don't want you to go. I got to think... about what I did here. Come here and talk to us.

You're not leaving till it's all been said.

I'm so happy that you did? Um- yes. You have got so much ahead of you. Yet not love, he said. It's true... I will never love another girl, at all. I'm not going to have nice things, fancy things, sure but not her... I don't want to live without it. It's never going to happen to me. Sh-h- boy- stop. It's not in the cards for me, don't you see it was all ripped away, like her life,

why? Stop it! You're going to die too, and we don't need that on- top. Oh! You know what? I'm going to do it. It's over.

Okay?

What is over? Come here.

The first time I ever saw her face- was...

He passed away with a broken heart.

(Falling to the floor with a thud.)

Not without a miracle. Despite the daily massages, Daina's legs were thin, stalky, and pale, like something that would grow on a flower. Unfluctuating as her face had come to be overweight, the flesh of her arms looser, and her legs continued to wither.

Close much...?

Interval

Deceiving my end

Part: 1

Here is something that only a short girl can do...

We- can kiss as I slide upon him as it goes out, and then that makes me able to reach his face to kiss, and I go back in and I have to leave the kiss to get it in me, so each time I go down, we part just for me to come to him to meet his waiting kiss, I have my hand under his head, and I pull him into for the lip lock. Over and over until... and we let it all in and make out for an hour or so.

Finally, today is the day that I am finally saying it. The day that I say for sure that I love Marcel, I am in love with that

boy. Sometimes, I reflect that he knew this all along. That they would laugh in my face if I said it to him in front of them.

He is- One of the most amazing things that can happen is finding someone who sees everything you are and won't let you be anything less. They see the potential for you. They see endless possibilities. And through their eyes, you start to see yourself the same way. As someone who matters.

As someone who can make a difference in this world. If you're lucky enough to find this person, never let them go.' 'Hey,' he says, surprised. 'You're not going to sit with me?' I try to keep walking down the aisle, but he grabs my arm. Are you kidding me?

You have to sit with me.' He looks around to see if anybody's listening.

'You're my girlfriend.' I shake him off. 'We're breaking up soon, aren't we? We might as well make it look more realistic.' When I slide into the seat next to her, Chris is shaking her head at me. 'What? I couldn't just let you sit alone. You came here for me, after all.' I open up my backpack and show her the snacks. 'See? I bought your favorite things. What do you want to eat first? Gummies or sugar or sugar?'

'It's barely even morning,' she grouses. Then: 'Hand me the gummies.'

Smiling, I rip open the bag for her. 'Have as much as you want.' I stop smiling when I see him get on the bus and sit down in the seat next to me, he wants to be.

'You did that to him,' 'For you!' Which isn't true, not really. I think maybe I'm just tired of all this. This in-between-ness of being somebody's girlfriend but not really. He stretches. But- 'You can never wholly know anyone, no matter how well

you think you do. There will always be some truth about them you don't ever get to know.' I stuff a gummy into my mouth and chew, and swallow too hard. I watch Maggie whisper something in Lizzie's ear, and Marcel falls asleep right away just like she said, his head on my shoulder. It's implausible how you can affect someone else so deeply and never know.

Two days before my death- school trip.

(Remembering as he sleeps)

Listen to him and the music in my one ear. Head on my shoulder I say I love you; I recall that- 'I enjoyed the hot tub moments.' 'I always do- flashback.' I'm shaking.

Is it true?

I love him!

Things don't get better just because you want them to. The unwise thing about anger is how people hurt you, and then you let them keep hurting you by being angry about how they originally hurt you. It's a vicious cycle... Could he be right? It's interesting how something that comes so easily to one person can be so impossible for someone else, no one can be everything you want them to be.

The physical attraction that is strong is addictive.

As well as knowing what kind of magic a fantasy isn't, it just makes me want to find it again. But what about being with someone who makes me a better person? What about sharing my life with someone who adores me as much as I adore him, whom I can always count on, who benefits me to find my way when- I'm lost? I want deeper connections with the people around me. I need to reach out more. For the reason that not everyone leaves. Every so often if you reach out, the person you're trying to reach will be right there waiting.

The past doesn't just disappear after it's happened or was it happening to me for you to see? Sometimes amid all your boy drama, you just need a cupcake... like I would love to eat one with him now, both biting at the same time kissing getting on our nose and oddly like that off. He licked me... so- yeah. It's up to me to create the life I want. He never gives up on who I am or who I could be. He doesn't run away when things get complicated.

Now that I know where this life is going, it's time to decide how I'll get there.

Just when it seems like life is getting good, something always has to come along and ruin it, waiting for my real life to start is no excuse to waste the life I have right now. One of the most amazing things that can happen is finding someone who sees everything you are and won't let you be anything less. They see the potential for you. They see endless possibilities. And through their eyes, you start to see yourself the same way. As someone who can make a difference in this world. If you're lucky enough to find that person, never let them go.

It used to be extremely common for families to have two parents. They stayed together because that's what all the other parents did. Now there are so many options, so many different ways to be a family. So many ways to rip a family apart. But maybe those things are like background noise if you're from here.

Maybe you have to experience this as a whole new place to appreciate it as I do. The only person I can count on is myself. It's up to me to create the life I want. I can't blame my parents or him or her or she or anyone else for the way things are... I just never stopped believing that what I wanted could be real, seriously, if we stayed inside the lines on everything we're

supposed to be doing, we wouldn't get anything done. Know what I mean?

~\*~

When I open my back door, Marcel is holding his phone over his head playing 'Stay with me he put lyrics to my piano.'

'Happy anniversary,' he says.

'You remembered!' I've been wondering if he was going to remember that our first date was one month ago today. He didn't say anything at school.

So, I didn't say anything, either. I didn't want to come off like a total spaz over being together for a month.

Now I'm so happy I didn't ruin his surprise. I had no idea he was organizing this when he said he wanted to come over tonight. He comes in and kisses me. Still holding his phone over his head. Still playing 'In Your Eyes.'

'You are imperative,' I tell him.

'I don't rule yet. Maybe I'll rule when we get to where I'm taking you to celebrate. If you like what we're doing.'

'You didn't have to do all this.'

Marcel hugs me tight. 'I wanted to make tonight special.'

It's hard to believe we've only been together for one month now. It feels like I've known him forever.

In the present day at lunch, we were talking about last Saturday night. We were driving around in Ethan's car with no destination in mind. I was supposed to be home in half an hour.

But I was desperately trying to block out the harsh reality of time.

The sex- all the first week...

‘And we got the motel room for safety. You were tired, and we were worried you might fall asleep at the wheel.’

‘Exactly. Your mom would buy that, right?’

‘As much as your mom would.’ We smirked at each other. Both moms would see right through that scam. He reached into my lap and held my hand. This was always the worst part of the night when we knew we’d have to go home soon. I wanted to drive around all night. Holding hands in my lap or his. Singing along to the radio. Getting lost downside streets to make out. We’re both shocked by how much alone time we want together. Neither of us has ever felt this way before.

Ethan loves having lots of people around. He’s a classic extrovert like me. We’re both into going out and meeting new people. But nothing compares to how happy I am when it’s just the two of us. A Pearl Jam or maybe STP or some rock song. Ethan started laughing.

‘Could you repeat that?’ I asked.

‘Incomprehensible situation.’

‘Try me.’

‘How are you so breathtaking?’

‘How are you so tremendous?’

‘We are both geeks at heart. That makes us both splendid and cute-z.’



'I love our unintelligible awesomeness.' 'I love everything about you.'

Stay with me! He said as I looked back on it. He made me melt when he said that. I was melting right into the passenger seat. My bones went soft, and my heart swelled, and I could not imagine ever feeling happier than I did that second. I knew he could see how much I loved him when he looked into my eyes. We have not said 'I love you!' to each other yet or did I want to confess that to him or me. But we both know it is there.

That night in his car feels like it was three weeks ago. Nevertheless, it was only three days ago. When we are together, time dilates and stretches in mysterious ways. It is like we enter our private universe. Expressly when we are alone.

Specifically, when we are making out.

When he is touching me and kissing me and we are pressed against each other in bed, I never want it to end. I wish we could stay together forever. We usually go to my apartment after school. One minute will be forever and never-ending to me, and we will have three whole hours until he has to be home for dinner.

The next thing we know is after seven. How do hours pass in a space of time that feels like minutes or forever?

~\*~

I suspect back in the room, I change into my blarney nighty and put on thick socks. I do not even go wash up. I just turn out the lights and crawl into bed. I cannot fall asleep, though. Every time I close my eyes, I see his face. How dare he say I need to grow up? What does he know about anything? As if he is so mature!

But... is he right about me? Do I only like the boys I can never have? I had always known Marcel was out of my reach, yet not out of my hands. I have always known he did not belong to me.

But tonight, he said he liked me. The thing I have been in suspense for, he said it. So why didn't I just tell him I liked him hindmost when I had the chance? Because I do. I like him back.

Of course, I do. What girl would not fall for him, the most handsome boy of all the handsome boys?

Now that I know him, I know he is so much more than that. I do not want to be afraid anymore. I want to be brave. I want life to start fashionably. I want to fall in love, and I want a boy to fall in love with me back. Formerly I can talk myself out of it, I put on my puffy coat, slip my keycard in my pocket, and head off to the hot tub.

THE HOT TUB IS OVERDUE, the foremost cottage, tucked in the woods on a wooden platform. On the way there, I ran into kids with wet hair who were on their way back to their rooms before the time limit set by mom. Curfew is at eleven for me, and it is already ten fifty-five. There is not much time left.

~\*~

Kellie- I hope Ray is still out there. I don't want to lose my nerve. So, I quickened my pace and that's when I spotted him, alone in the hot tub, his head tipped back with his eyes closed. Time is going to pass even faster tonight. I have no idea where Ethan's taking me to celebrate. But something tells me it's going to be romantic. 'In Your Eyes' finishes playing. Ethan smiles in that way he has where his eyes sparkle like I'm the most important person to him. 'Are you prepared?' he asks. Why does it seem like he's asking about more than just tonight?

Ethan won't give me any hints in his car. He even takes a few random turns to fake me out.

Our small town is already shut down for the night. The river, piers, and boats all seem like they're sleeping. I'm surprised when we end up at his house. 'Didn't see that coming,' I say. 'You have no idea... What I go through' No one's home at Ray's house. We go up to his room. which is filled with candles. Candles in different shapes, sizes, and colors are on every available surface. Candles are on the windowsills, the dresser, the desk, the shelves, and the night table. There are even some big pillar candles clustered in a corner on the floor. He turns the lights off. He starts lighting candles.

'Have a seat,' he says.

'This might take a while.'

(Romantic only for her) I lie back on

Ray's big bed and watches him light the candles. I love watching him. One time he fell asleep in my room. I watched him for almost an hour, memorizing the slope of his nose, the curves of his cheeks, and the shape of his lips. He is the most gorgeous boy I've ever seen. And he picked me... over them all and even my sis that he freaked first, and I have to live with that. How did I get so lucky? After the lights the last candle, Ray grabs his I- Pod.

He lies down next to me. Then he puts one earbud in my ear and the other in his. 'Thanks again for the song last night, you know I wanted it- and you too' he says. 'I loved it.' where may I love you; I asked him for it and got love yah! I was so nervous about sending Ray 'Everything' by Lifehouse.

I have had that song on repeat ever since the day Ethan first asked me out.

To me, it's Ray's love song for us. It sounds like him. It feels like him. I love losing myself to the sound of him. I'm so deep in the love haze, I can't remember what I used to think about before Ray. Last night I was suddenly inspired to share the song with him. The message I wrote with it said that he's all I want. He's all I need.

What we have is amazing.

The second I sent the song, I worried that it was too much. The last thing I want to do is scared him away. Nevertheless, he isn't a representative boy. He doesn't get freaked out by strong emotions. And he's so romantic. 'Your song inspired me to find one for you,' Ethan says. Haunting, resonant music starts playing in our earbuds. 'You're the Inspiration' 'Their music is beautiful. Just like you.' Melting- On-The bed.

'I don't have the words to tell you how I feel about you. So, I found a song in another language to do it for me. I read that it's about two people falling in love. How they spend the day together walking around downtown and enjoying being in their world where they understand each other better than anyone ever has before.

It's called 'An all right Start.' I have to know its love-before I fall!

'You were being sweet. You're the sweetest girl I've ever known.'

More than your sister, more than 100 girls of the past too. You're 101 and that right... so right for me.

'You always out- romantic me. I thought I was being all sweet sending you everything. You're like, 'I had to go to a whole other philology to tell you how I feel!' I put my head on

his chest, breathing with him and listening to the music. Ethan slides his fingers through my hair over and over.

‘Excellent,’ Ray says.

‘Yeah- yepper?’

‘I love you- baby-love.’

~\*~

I lift my head to look at him. He glows in the candlelight. Just looking at him takes my breath away. ‘I love you, too,’ I tell him. Say it- say it- say it- say it- say it- say it- say it I was thinking over and over- I do this for you. I move that way... (She is more into her than he is her.)

How could it be any better than this? ‘Hi,’ I say, and my voice resonances into the woods. His eyes fly open. Nervously, he looks over my shoulder.

‘Liv- Jean! What are you doing out here?’ ‘I came to see you,’ I say, and my breath comes out in white puffs. I start taking off my boots and socks. My hands are shaking, and not because it’s cold. I’m nervous. ‘Uh... what are you doing?’ Marcel’s looking at me like I’m senseless.

~\*~

‘I’m getting in!’ Shivering, I unzip my puffy coat and set it on the bench. Steam is rising out of the water. I dip my feet in and sit down on the edge of the hot tub. It’s hotter than a bath, but it feels nice. Marcel’s still watching me warily.

My heart is sprinting out of control and it’s difficult to look him in the eyes. I’ve never been so scared in my life. ‘That thing you brought up earlier... you caught me off guard, so I didn’t know what to say. But ... well, I like you too.’ It comes out

so fumbling and uncertain, and I wish I could start over and say it smoothly and confidently. I try again, louder. 'I like it! Silly!

He blinks, and he looks so young all of a sudden. 'I don't understand you girls. I think I have you figured out, and then- and then... then, I hold my breath as I wait for him to speak. I'm so nervous; I keep swallowing soft and hard, and it sounds loud to my ears. Even my breathing sounds loud, even my heartbeat.

His pupils are dilated. He's looking at me so hard. He's staring at me like he's never seen me before. 'As well as then I do not know.'

I think I stop breathing when I hear him say 'I don't know.' Did I screw things up that badly that now he doesn't know? It can't be over, not when I finally found my courage. I can't let it be.

My heart is pounding like a million trillion beats a minute as I scoot closer to him. I bend my head down and press my lips against his, and I feel his jaws some in surprise. Besides, then he kisses me back, openmouthed, soft-tipped, kisses me back, and at first, I'm nervous, but then he puts his hand on the back of my head, and he reassuringly strokes my hair, and I'm not so nervous anymore. It's a good thing I'm sitting down on this ledge because I am weak in the knees. He pulls me into the water so I'm sitting in the hot tub too, and my nightgown is soaked now but I don't care. I don't care about anything. I never knew kissing could be this awesome.

My arms are at my sides, so the Jets won't make my skirt fly up. Marcel's holding my face in his hands, kissing me. 'Are you okay?' he whispers. His voice is different: it's ragged and imperative and susceptible somehow. He doesn't sound like he and I know; he is not smooth or bored or amused.

The way he's looking at me right now, I know he would do anything I asked, and that's a strange and powerful feeling. I wind my arms around his neck. I like the smell of chlorine on his skin. He smells like a pool, summer, and vacations. It's not like in the movies. It's better because it's real. 'Touch my hair again,' I tell him, and the corners of his mouth turn up. I leaned into him and kissed him.

He starts to run his fingers through my hair, and it feels so nice I can't think straight.

It's better than getting my hair washed at the salon. I move my hands down his back and along his spine, and he shivers and pulls me closer. A boy's back feels so different than a girl's back, more muscular, more solid somehow. In between kisses, he says, 'It's a past curfew. We should go back inside.'

'I don't want to,' I say. All I want is to stay and be here, with him, at this moment. 'Me either, but I don't want you to get in trouble,' Ray says. He looks worried, which is so sweet.

Softly, I touch his cheek with the back of my hand. It's smooth. I could look at his face for hours, it's so beautiful- oh so- and lovely. Then I stand up, and immediately I'm shivering. I start wringing the water out of my nightgown, and he jumps out of the hot tub and gets his towel, which he wraps around my shoulders. Then he gives me his hand and I step out, teeth chattering. He starts drying me off with the towel, my arms, and my legs. I sit down to put on my socks and boots.

He put my coat on me last. He zips me right in. Then we run back inside the lodge. Beforehand he goes to the boys' side, and I go to the girls' side, I kiss him one more time and I feel like I'm flying.

Part: 2

Butt up in the air pic! ≈ Past remembers of Karly... ≈

WHEN I SEE he is on the bus the next morning, he's standing around with all his lacrosse friends, and at first, I feel shy and nervous, but then he sees me, and his face breaks into a grin. 'He says, so I go to him, and he throws my tote over his shoulder. In my ear he says, 'You're sitting with me, right?'

I nod and look up sweet wetly. I am so short next to him that his hip is where my face is- I don't have to get on my knee's girls! As we make our way onto the bus, somebody wolf whistles. It seems like people are staring at us, and at first, I think it's just my imagination, but then I see Genevieve look right at me and whisper to Emily Assbaum. It sends a chill down my spine.

'Genevieve keeps staring at me,' I whisper to Marcel.

'It's because you're so adorably quirky,' he says, and he rests his hands on my shoulders and kisses me on the cheek, and I forget all about Genevieve.

Ray and I sit in the middle of the bus with Gabe and the lacrosse guys. I wave to Tom, so she'll sit with us, but she's cozies with Chad Dickhard. I haven't had a chance to tell her about last night. When I got back to the room, she was already asleep. This morning, we both overslept and there wasn't time. I'll tell her all about it later. But, for now, it's kind of nice that Ray and I are the only ones who know about it. On the way down the mountain, I shared my sweet sugary sticks with the boys, and we played a heated round of Uno, which I also bought. An hour into the trip, we stopped at a rest-stop dinner for breakfast. I eat a cinnamon bun, and under the table Ray, and I hold hands.

~\*~



I go to use the bathroom, and there is Genevieve, alone, applying lip gloss with a little brush. I step into the stall to pee and hope she'll be gone by the time I come out, but she's still there. I wash my hands quickly, and then she says, 'Did you know that when we were kids, I used to wish I was you?'

I freeze...

Genevieve snaps her compact shut. 'I used to wish your dad was my dad and Margot and Kitty were my sisters. I loved coming over to your house. I would hope and pray that you would invite me to the sleepover.'

Part: 3

(Us- on music trips and class)

'What key is this in?' he asks.

'B- Flat,' I tell him sweetly.

'My pages are messed up.' I make some notations on his sheet music with a pencil. 'Let's hit it,' Tom says from behind the drums. Stefan is only happy when he is behind the drums.

Tom, Killie, and Jenna furer are Marcel's bandmates. Those guys' high school days are behind them.

Now they are working random jobs while waiting for the band to become mega-famous. Their band is

Invincible. Marcel plays bass and Seath rocks the keyboard. Along with his best friend, Megan, these guys our closest...

~\*~

Shy- I hated being at home with my dad.' Haltingly, I say, 'I-I did not know that. I used to like going to your house because your mom was so nice to me.'

'She liked you,' Maddie says.

I screw up all my courage and I ask, 'So why did you stop being friends with me?'

Maddie narrows her eyes at me.

'You don't know?'

'No!'

'You kissed Ray that day at my house in seventh grade. You knew I liked him, but you kissed him anyway.' I recoil, and she remains. 'I always knew your goody-goody act was fake. It is no wonder you and my cousin are BFF's now. Although at least Chad owns her sluttiness. She does not put on an act.'

My whole body goes rigid. 'What are you talking about?'

She laughs, and it is chilling how happy she sounds. That is when I know I am already dead. I brace myself for whatever mean thing will come out of her mouth, but even still I am not ready for what comes next.

Part: 4

Video- of my shows- and there over 50 of them all online forever, and 10 pages of me need dripping to come from my puss, with those kinds of pics!

Karly- 'I'm talking about how you and Marcel had full-on sex in the hot tub last night.' My mind goes completely blank. I might even blackout for a second. I can feel myself swaying on my feet. Somebody comes quickly with the smelling salts; I am about to faint. My head is swimming. 'Who told you that?' I choked out. 'Who said that?' Maddie tilts her head to the side.

'Everybody?'

‘But then again... we didn’t.’

‘I’m sorry, but I think it’s disgusting. I mean, sex in a hot tub- a public hot tub- is just ... ‘She shudders.’ ‘God only knows what kind of stuff is floating around in there now.

Families use that hot tub, Lara Jean. There could be a family in there right now.’

Tears are spiking my eyes. ‘All we did was kiss. I don’t know why people would even say that.’

‘Um, because Marcel telling them you did?’

My whole body is cold. It’s not true. There’s no way that’s true.

‘All the guys think he’s a God because he got sweet little Lara Jean Covey to give it up in the hot tub. Just so you know, the only reason Marcel even dated you was to make me jealous.

His ego couldn’t take the fact that I dumped him for an older guy. He was using you. If he got free sex out of it, all the better. But he still came running whenever I called.

That’s because he loves me. He will never love another girl as much as he loves me.’ Whatever she sees in my face must please her, because she smiles. ‘Now that Blake and I are done- well, I guess we’ll see, won’t we?’ I stand there mute and numb as she fluffs her hair in the mirror.

‘But don’t worry. Now that you’re a slut, I’m sure you’ll have plenty of guys who’ll want to date you. For a night.’

I flee. I run out of the ladies’ room and out the doors, back onto the bus, and I cry.

PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO FILE back on the bus. I can feel their eyes on me, so I keep my head turned toward the

window. I ran my finger along the edge of the foggy glass. The window is cold, so it leaves a trail.

Chad slides in next to me. In a deep voice, she says, 'Um, I just heard something cray-cray.' Uninteresting, I say, 'What did you hear? That Marcel and I had sex in the hot tub last night?'

'Oh my God! Yes! Are you okay?'

My chest feels tight. If I get a good breath, I am going to start crying again, I know it.

I close my eyes. 'We did not have sex. Who told you that?'

'Marcel.' -making his way down the aisle. He stops at our seat. 'Hey, why didn't you come back to the table? Is everything okay?' Marcel is looming over the seat, looking at me with concerned eyes.

In a quiet voice, I say, 'Everybody's saying how we had sex in the tub.'

He groans. 'People need to mind their own business.' He does not sound surprised, not at all.

'So, you already knew?'

'Some of the guys were asking me about it this morning.'

'But- where did they even get that idea?' I feel like I am going to be sick.

He shrugs. 'I don't know, somebody saw us. What does it even matter? It's not true.'

I fasten my lips together tightly. I cannot cry right now, because if I start, I will never be able to stop. I will cry the whole

way home, and everyone will see, and I cannot have that. I fix my observation somewhere over his slick shoulder.

‘I do not get it. Why are you mad at me?’ He is still confused.

People are starting to bottleneck behind Marcel. They need to get to their seats. ‘People are waiting for you,’ I say.

He says, ‘Chad, can I have my chair here?’ Chris looks at me and I shake my head.

Part: 5

A little hair on my puss- yet it is down on my dildo, that sucked to a book, so I can thrill ride it hard, till I scream come, for all you boys, and you knotty girls too.

≈ Past remembers of

Karly’s sis... ≈

‘It’s my seat now, D\*ckweed,’ she says.

‘Come on, Liv Jean,’ he is saying, touching my shoulder.

I jerk away from him, and his mouth drops open. People are looking at us, whispering, and snickering.

He glances over his shoulder, his face red. Then he finally made his way down the aisle.

‘Are you okay?’ Chad asks.

I can feel my eyes welling up. ‘No. Not really.’

She sighs. ‘It is not fair for the girl. Guys have it easy. I am sure they were all acknowledging him, pounding him on the back for being such a stud.’ Snuffling, I say, ‘Do you think he’s the one who told folks?’

‘Who knows?’

A tear trickles down to my cheek and Chad wipes it away with her sweater sleeve. ‘It might not have been him. But it does not matter, Liv- Jean, because even if he did not encourage all the talk, I doubt he discouraged it, if you know what I am saying.’

I shake my head.

‘What I am saying is, I am sure he denied it- with a shit-eating grin on his face. That is how guys like Marcel are. They love to look like the man, have all the other guys look up to them.’ Brattie says, ‘They care more about their reputation than yours.’ She shakes her head. ‘But what has been done is done. You have just got to hold your head up and act like you do not give a shit.’ I nod, but more tears leak out.

‘I am telling you; he is not worth it. Let Gen have him.’ Chris tousles my hair.

‘What else can you do, kid?’

Olivia comes on board last. I quickly straighten up and wipe my eyes and brace myself. But she does not go directly to her seat. She stops at Beth Morgan’s seat and whispers something in her ear. Beth gasps and turns to her seat- and looks right at me.

OMG- Oh my God- my God...

Chad and I watch as Genevieve goes from seat to seat.

‘B\*tch,’ Chad respires.

Tears burn my eyes. ‘I’m just going to go to sleep now,’ and I rest my head on Chad’s shoulder, and I cry. She keeps her arm tight around me.

Part: 6

Photo of my boobs ≈ Past remembers of Karly sis... ≈  
MAGGIE AND KILLIE PICK ME up from school. They ask me how the trip was if I stayed on the slope all day. I try to be upbeat; I even make up a story about how I went down a blue circle slope. Softly SHE asks, 'Is everything okay?'

I pause- to the moments within. Maggie always knows when I'm not significant in telling the truth. 'Yeah. I'm just tired. Chad and I stayed up late talking.'

'Take a nap when we get home,' Maggie recommends.

My phone buzzes and I look down at it. A text from Marcel.

Can we talk?

I turned off my phone. 'I think maybe I'll just sleep right through Christmas break,' I say. Thank God and Jesus for Christmas break. I have at least ten days before I have to go back to school and face everyone. Maybe I'll just never go back. Maybe I can convince Daddy to homeschool me.

When Daddy and Killie go to bed, Margot and I wrap presents in the living room. Middle- wrap, Maggie decides that we should have a recital party the day after Christmas. I'd hoped she'd forgotten all about her grand idea to have a recital party, but Margot's memory has always been killer. 'It will be a post- Christmas, Pre- New Year's Eve party,' she says, tying a bow on one of Kitty's presents from Daddy.

~\*~

'It's too last-minute,' I say, carefully cutting a sheet of rocking horse wrapping paper. I'm being extra careful because I

want to save a strip of it for a background page in Maggie's scrapbook, which is nearly done. 'No one will come.'

'Yes, they will! We haven't had one in ages; tons of people used to come.' She gets up and starts pulling down Mommy's old cookbooks and stacking them on the coffee table.

'Don't be a Grinch. I think this should be a tradition that we bring back for Kellie's sake.' I cut off a strip of fat green ribbon. Maybe this party will help me take my mind off things. 'Find that Mediterranean chicken dish Mommy used to make. With the honey yogurt dip.'

'Yes! And remember the caviar dip? People love caviar dip. We have to do that, too. Should we make cheese straws or cheese puffs?'

'Cheese puffs,' I say. Margot's so excited about it that even in my current state of self-pity, I can't begrudge her. She gets a pen and paper from the kitchen and starts writing things down. 'So, we said the chicken dish, caviar dip, cheese puffs, punch ... We can bake some cookies or brownies. We'll invite all the neighbors- Josh and his parents, the Shahs, Ms. Child.

Who of your friends do you want to invite? Chad?'

I shake my head. 'Chad is visiting Becca Mitchel, her relatives in the upper parts of the state. around this time...

Too quickly I say, 'No. Nothing happened.'

'I think he might be going out of town too.' I can tell Maggie he doesn't believe me, but she doesn't press me further.

(Flashback)

Kellie- She sends the invites out that night, and right away there are five yeses. In the comments section Aunt-e -M.



(not our real aunt, but one of Mommy's best friends) writes, Maggie, I can't wait to hear you and dad sing 'Baby, It's Cold Outside!' Another recital party tradition. Maggie and Daddy intone 'Baby, It's Cold Outside' and I am always commissioned to sing 'Santa Baby.' I used to do it lying on top of the piano with my mom's high heels on and our grandma's fox stole. Not this year. No way.

When Maggie tries to get me to go with her and Killie to deliver our cookie baskets to the nationals the next day, I beg off and say I'm tired. I go up to my room to put the finishing touches on Maggie's scrapbook and listen to only the slow songs from Dirty Dancing, and I keep checking my phone to see if Ray texted again.

He hasn't, but Ray has. I heard what happened. Are you okay? So even Josh knows? He's not even in our grade. Does the whole school know? I write back, it isn't true, and he writes back, you don't have to tell me- I didn't believe it for a second, which makes me feel weepy. He and Maggie have hung out once since she's been home, but they haven't taken that DC trip Josh mentioned. It's probably for the best if I go ahead and take the Josh and- Maggie page out of the scrapbook.

I stay up late just in case Ray texts again. I think to myself, if he calls or texts me tonight, I'll know he's thinking about me too and maybe I'll forgive him.

But he doesn't text or call, around three a.m. I throw away Marcel's notes. I deleted the picture of him from my phone; I deleted his number. I think that if I just delete him enough, it will be like none of it ever happened and my heart won't hurt so badly.

Part: 7

Kelly- Photo of me using my butt plug and masturbating over 6 times!

≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister... ≈ Video online forever- CHRISTMAS MORNING, KITTY WAKES Us, Everyone, while it is still- um- dark out, which is her tradition, and Daddy makes waffles, which is his tradition.

We only ever eat waffles on Christmas, for the reason that we all agree it's too much trouble to lug the waffle iron out and clean it and store it back on the cabinet top shelf where we keep it. And anyway, it makes waffles more of a special occasion this way.

We take turns opening presents to make it last longer. I gave Maggie her scarf, and the scrapbook, which she loves. She pores over every page, screaming over my handiwork, marveling over my font choices and paper scraps. Hugging it to her chest, she says, 'This is the perfect gift,' and I feel like all the tension and bad feelings between us evaporate into nothingness. Maggie's gift to me is a pale pink cashmere sweater from Scotland.

I tried it on over my nightgown and it's so soft and luxurious. Kylie's present from Maggie is an art set with oil pastels and watercolors and special markers, which makes Killie squeal like a piglet. In return, Kitty gives her socks with monkeys on them. I gave Killie a new basket for her bike and the ant farm she asked for months ago, and Killie gave me a book on knitting. 'So, you can get better,' she says.

The three of us pitched in for Daddy's present, a thick Scandinavian pullover that makes him look like an ice fisherman. It's a little too big, but Daddy insists he likes it that way. He gave Maggie a fancy new e-reader, Kitty, a bike helmet with her name on it, Kellie, and me a gift certificate to Oliva Grandin. 'I wanted to get you that locket necklace you're always

looking at, but it was gone,' he says. 'But I bet you will find something else you like just as much.' I jump up and throw my arms around him. I feel like I could cry.

Santa, aka Daddy, brings silly gifts like sacks of coal and water guns with disappearing ink inside, and also practical things like athletic socks and printer ink and my favorite kind of pens- I guess Santa shops at Costco too. Santa- got Killie a new dildo too, thanks to me!

When we're done with the opening presents, I can tell Cat is disappointed there is no puppy, but she doesn't say anything. I pull her into my arms and whisper to her, 'There's always your birthday next month,' and she nods.

Daddy goes to see if the waffle iron is hot and the doorbell rings. 'Kellie, could you get that?' He calls from the pantry.

Kellie goes to the door, and seconds later we hear her high-pitched scream. Maggie and I leap up and run to the door, and right there on the welcome mat is a basket with a biscuit-colored puppy in it and a ribbon around its neck. We all start jumping up and down and high-pitched yelling.

Kellie scoops the puppy up in her arms and runs into the living room with it, where Daddy stands grinning. 'Daddy- Daddy- Daddy- Daddy!' she cries. 'Thank you thank you thank you!' I got a goofy small for what I got here and ran me over a hug.

According to Daddy, he picked the puppy up from the animal shelter two nights ago, and our neighbor Ms. Rothschild has been hiding him in her house. It's a boy, by the way, we figure that out pretty quick since he pees all over the kitchen floor.

Part: 8

Karly- Photo of me showing my ass and spreading puss-puss!

≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister... ≈

'I always wanted a dog with bangs,' I say, cuddling him to my cheek.

'What should we name him?'

Maggie asks. We all look to Killie, who chews on her bottom lip in a contemplative way.

'I don't know,' she says.

'How about Sandy?' I suggest.

Killie sneers. 'Unoriginal.'

'No thanks,' Kitty says. Cocking her head, she says, 'What about Jenny?'

'Jenny,' Daddy repeats. 'I like it, yet she is not here so do not say...' Maggie nods. 'It has a nice ring to it... yeah moving on.'

'What's her full name?' I asked, setting him down on the floor.

She claps her hands and says it, wagging like mad.

I only checked my phone once to see if Marcel had called. And he didn't.

THE MORNING OF THE PART- I came downstairs after ten, and they were working for hours.

~\*~

Kelly- young Holladay's:

‘Hello, the toilet needed to be scrubbed anyway!

Besides, it will all be worth it. We have not had a recital party in so long.’

She slides a cookie sheet into the oven. ‘Daddy, I am going to need you to make a run to the store soon. We are out of sour cream, and we need a big bag of ice.’

‘Aye, aye, Captain,’ our dad says.

The only one of us Margot does not put to work is Jamie Fox-Pickle, who is taking a nap under the Christmas tree.

I am wearing a red-and-green plaid bow tie with a white button-down and a tartan skirt. I read on a fashion blog that mixing plaids is a thing. I go to Kitty’s room to beg her to give me a braid crown, and she curls her lip at me and says, ‘That’s not very sexy.’

I frown... ‘Excuse me? I was not trying to look sexy! I was trying to look festive.’

Hmm... We might need to put some parental controls on the TV.

Killie goes to my closet and pulls out my red off-the-shoulder knit dress with the swishy skirt. ‘Wear this. It is still Christmassy but less self-consuming.’

‘Fine, but I’m putting my candy cane pin on it.’

‘Fine, you can wear the pin. But let your hair down. No braid.’ I give her my best sad pouty face, but Killie shakes her head. ‘I’ll curl the ends to give it somebody, but no braids of any kind.’ I plug in the curling iron and sit on the floor with Jamie in my lap, and Kitty sits on the bed and sections my hair off. She wraps my hair around the barrel like a real pro.

The party?’ She asks me.

‘I’m not sure,’ I say.

‘What about Marcel?’

‘He’s not coming,’ I say.

‘Why not?’

‘He just can’t,’ I tell her.

Maggie’s at the piano playing ‘Blue Christmas,’ and our old piano sitting next to her singing along. Across the room, Daddy is showing off a new cactus about her divorce when Marcel walks in wearing a green sweater with a button-down shirt underneath, carrying a Christmas tin. I almost choked on my punch.

Kitty spots him when I do. ‘You came!’ she cries. She runs right into his arms, and he puts down the cookie tin, picks her up, and throws her around. When he sets her down, she takes him by the hand and over to the buffet table, where I’m busying myself rearranging the cookie plate.

‘Look what Marcel brought,’ she says, pushing him forward. He hands me the cookie tin. ‘Here. Fruitcake cookies my mom made.’ ‘What are you doing here?’ I whispered accusingly. ‘The kid invited me.’ He jerks his head toward Kellie, who has conveniently run back over to the puppy. Marcel is standing up now, looking over at us with a frown on his face.

‘We need to talk.’

So now he wants to talk. Well, too late. ‘We don’t have anything to talk about.’

Marcel takes me by the elbow, and I try to shake him off, but he will not let go. He steers me into the kitchen. ‘I want

you to make up an excuse to Kellie and leave,' I say... 'And you can take your fruitcake cookies with you.'

'First, tell me why you're so pissed at me.'

'Because!' I burst out. 'Everyone is saying how we had sex in the hot tub and I'm a slut and you don't even care!'

'I told the guys we didn't!'

'Did you? Did you tell them that all we did was kiss and that is all we have ever done?' Marcel hesitates, and I go on. 'Or did you say, 'Guys, we did not have sex in the hot tub,' wink-wink, nudge- nudge.'

Marcel glares at me. 'Give me a little more credit than that, Covey.'

'You're such a scumbag, Marcel.'

I spin around. There is Marcel, in the doorway, glaring at Marcel.

'It's your fault people are saying that crap about Lara Jean.' Marcel shakes his head in disgust. 'She'd never do that.'

'Keep your voice down,' I whisper, my eyes darting around. This is not happening right now. At a recital party, with everyone, I have known my entire life in the next room.

Marcel's jaw twitches. 'This is a private conversation, Marcel, between me and my girlfriend. Why don't you go play World of Warcraft or something? Or there's a

Godfather marathon on TV.'

'Freak you,' Marcel says. I gasped. To me, Marcel says, 'Liv, Jean, this is exactly what I have been trying to protect you from. He is not good enough for you. He is only bringing you

down.’ Beside me, Marcel stiffens. ‘Get over it! She does not like you anymore. It is over. Move on.’

‘You have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Marcel says. ‘Whatever, man. She told me you tried to kiss her. You try that again, and I am kicking your ass.’

Marcel lets out a short laugh.

‘Go ahead.’

Panic rises in my chest as Marcel moves toward Marcel with purpose. I pulled Marcel’s arm back. ‘Stop it!’ That’s when I see her. Margot, standing a few feet behind Marcel, her hand to her mouth. The piano music has stopped, the world has stopped spinning because Maggie has heard the whole thing.

‘It’s not true, is it? Please tell me if it’s not true.’

I open and close my mouth. I don’t have to say anything because she already knows.

Maggie knows me so well. ‘How could you?’ she asks, and her voice trembles. The hurt in her eyes makes me want to die. I’ve never seen that look in her eyes before.

‘Margot,’ Marcel begins, and she shakes her head and backs away. ‘Get out,’ she says, her voice breaking. Then she looks at me. ‘You’re my sister.’

You’re the person- I trust more than anybody.’

‘Go-go, wait-’ But she’s already gone. I hear her feet run up the stairs. I hear her door shut and not slam.

And then I burst into tears.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Marcel says to me. Forlornly, he says, ‘This is all my fault.’ He walks out of the back door.



Marcel moves to put his arms around me, but I stop him. 'Can you just... can you just go?'

Hurt and surprise registered on his face. 'Sure, I can go,' he says, and he walks out of the kitchen. I go to the bathroom, off the side of the kitchen, and sit on the toilet and cry. Someone knocks, and I stop crying and call out, 'Just a minute or so.'

Then I get up and splash chilly water on my face. My eyes are still red and puffy. I ran water with a hand towel, and I wet my face with it.

My mom used to do this for me when I was sick... She had put an ice-cold washcloth over my forehead, and she would switch it out with a fresh one when it was not cold anymore. I wish my mom were here.

Part: 9

When I step back into the party, Maggie is sitting at the piano playing- 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,' and I have my dad cornered on the couch. She is throwing back champagne, and he has a mildly startled look on his face. As soon as he sees me, my dad jumps off the couch and over to me. 'Oh, thank God,' he says. 'Where's Go-go? We have not done our number yet.'

'She doesn't feel well,' I say.

'Hm. I'll go check on her.'

'She just wants to be left alone.'

Daddy's forehead creases.

'Did she and Marcel fight? I just saw him leave.'

I swallow. 'Maybe. I will talk to her.'

He pats me on the shoulder.

'You're a good sister, honey.'

I force a smile. 'Thank you, Daddy.'

I go upstairs, and Margot's bedroom door is locked. I stand outside it and ask, 'Can I come inside?' No answer.

'Please, Margot. Please just let me enlighten me...' Still nothing.

'I am sorry. Maggie, I am so sorry.

Please talk to me.'

I sat down outside my door and started to cry. My big sister knows how to hurt me best. Silence from her, being shut out by her, is the worst punishment she could conjure up. BEFORE MOMMY DIED, Maggie AND I were friends. We battled constantly, mostly because I was always messing up something of hers- some game, some toy. Maggie had a doll she loved named Rochelle. Rochelle had silky auburn hair, and she wore glasses as Margot did.

Mommy and Daddy had given her to her for her sixth birthday. Maggie only doll. She adored her. I remember begging her to let me hold her, just for a second, but Margot always said no.

There was this one time, I had a cold, and I stayed home from school.

I crept into Margot's room, and I took... She and I played with her all afternoon. I pretended she and I were best friends. I got it into my head that Rochelle's face was plain; she would look better with lipstick on. It would be a favor too- her- if I made them more beautiful.

I got one of Mommy's lipsticks out of her bathroom drawer and I put some on her lips. Right away I knew it was a mistake. I had drawn it on the outside of her lip lines, she looked clownish, not sophisticated. So, then I tried to clean off the lipstick with toothpaste, but it only made her look like she had a mouth disease.

I hid under my blankets until Margot came home. When she found the state Rochelle was in, I heard her screech.

After Mommy died, we all had to realign ourselves. Everybody had new roles. She and I were no longer locked in battle because we both understood that Kellie was ours to take care of now. 'Look out for your sister,' Mommy was always saying. When she was alive, we did it begrudgingly. After she was gone, we did it because we wanted to. Days go by and still nothing. She looks through me, speaks to me only when necessary.

Part: 10

Kelly- Photo of me with my pink vibrates.

≈ Past remembrance of Karly little sister ≈

Kellie watches us with worried eyes. Daddy is bewildered and asks what is going on with us but does not push me for an answer. There is a wall between us now, and I can feel her moving farther and farther away from me. Sisters are supposed to fight and make up because they are sisters and sisters always find their way back to each other. But the thing that scares me is that we won't.

OUTSIDE MY WINDOW, SNOW IS falling in clumps that look like cotton.

The yard is starting to look like a cotton field. I hope it snows all day and all night. I hope it is a blizzard.

There is a knock at my door.

I lift my head from my pillow. 'Come in.'

My dad comes in and sits down at my desk. 'So,' he says, scratching his chin the way he does when he is uncomfortable. 'We need to talk.'

My stomach drops. I sit up and wrap my arms around my knees. 'Did Margot tell you?'

My dad clears his throat. 'She did.' I cannot even look at him. 'This is awkward. I never had to do this with Margot, so...' He clears his throat again.

'You would think I would be better at this since I am a health professional. I will just say that I think you are too young to be having sex, Liv, Jean- girls. I do not think you are ready yet.' He sounds like he is about to cry.

'Did- did Marcel pressure you in any way?'

I can feel all the blood rush to my face. 'Daddy, we didn't have sex.'

He nods, but I don't think he believes me. 'I'm your dad, so of course, I'd rather you wait until you're fifty, but...' He clears his throat again. 'I want you to be safe. I'm making an appointment with Dr. Vudeciez on Monday.'

I started to cry. 'I don't need an appointment because I'm not doing anything! I didn't have sex! Not in the hot tub or anyplace. Somebody made the whole thing up. You have to believe me.'

My dad has a pained expression on his face. 'Liv, Jean-girls, I know it's not easy to talk about this with a dad and not a mom. I wish your mom was here to navigate us through this.'

'I wish she was too because she'd believe me.' Tears are running down my cheeks. It's bad enough for strangers to think the worst of me, but I never thought my sister and dad would believe it.

'I'm sorry.' My dad puts his arms around me. 'I'm sorry. I do believe you. If you tell me you're not having sex, you're not having sex. I just don't want you to grow up too fast. When I look at you, you're still as young as Kellie to me. You're my little girl, Liv, Jean- girls.'

I sag against him. There's no place safer than my dad's arms. 'Everything's a mess. You don't trust me anymore; Marcel and I have broken up; Margot hates me.' 'I trust you. Of course, I trust you.

And of course, you and Margot will make up like you always do. She was only worried about you; that's why she came to me.' No, it's not. She did it out of spite. It's her fault that Daddy thought that of me for even a second.

Daddy lifts my chin and wipes the tears off my face. 'You must like Marcel, huh?'

'No,' I sob. 'Maybe. I don't know.'

He tucks my hair behind my ears. 'Everything will work out.' There is a specific kind of fight you can only have with your sister. It's the kind where you say things you can't take back. You say them for the reason that you can't help but say them because you're so angry it's coming up your throat and out your eyes; you're so angry you can't see straight.

Part: 11

All you see is blood. As soon as Daddy leaves and I hear him go to his room to get ready for bed, I barge into Maggie's room without knocking.

Margot is at her desk on her laptop.

She looks up at me in surprise. Wiping my eyes, I say, 'You can be mad at me all you want, but you had no right to go to Daddy behind my back.'

Her voice is piano-string tight as she says, 'I did not do that as revenge. I did it because you have no idea what you are doing, and if you are not careful, you are going to end up with some sad teenage statistics.' Coldly, as if she is speaking to a stranger, Maggie continues. 'You have changed, Liv, Jenn- girls. I honestly do not even know who you are anymore.'

~\*~

'Nope, you do not know me anymore, if you think for one second that I would have sex on a school trip! In a hot tub, in plain view of anybody who might happen to walk by? You must not know me at all!' And then I lay it down, the card I had been holding against her. 'Just because you had sex with Marcel, that doesn't mean I'm going to have sex with Marcel.'

Margot sucks in her breath.

'Lower your voice.'

I feel happy that I have wounded her too. I yell, 'Now that Daddy's already disappointed in me, he can't be disappointed in you, too, right?'

I whirl around to go back to my room, and Margot follows close behind me.

'Come back here!' She shouts.

'No!' I try to close my door in her face, but she wedges her foot inside.

'Get out!'

I lean my back against the door, but Margot is stronger than me. She pushes her way in and locks the door behind her.

She advanced toward me, and I backed away from her. There's a dangerous light in her eyes. She's the righteous one now. I can feel myself start to shrink, to cower. 'How did you know Marcel and I had sex, Lara Jean?

Did he tell you that himself while you two were going behind my back?' 'We never went behind your back! It wasn't like that.'

'Then what was it like?' She demands.

A sob escapes my throat. 'I liked him at first. I liked him all that summer before ninth grade. I thought - thought he liked me back. But then one day you said you were dating, and so I just, I swallowed it. I wrote him a goodbye letter.' Maggie's face twists into a sneer. 'Do you seriously expect me to feel sorry for you now?'

'Nope. I am just trying to explain what happened. I stopped liking him, I swear I did. I did not think of him like that again, but then, after you left, I realized that deep down I still had feelings for him. And then my letter got sent and Marcel found out, so I started to pretend to date, Marcel...'

She shakes her head. 'Just stop. I do not want to hear it. I do not even know what you are talking about right now.'

'Marcel and I only kissed one time. Once. And it was a huge mistake, and I did not even want to do it in the first place! You are the one he loves, not me.'

She says, 'How can I believe anything you ever say to me now?'

'Because it's the truth.'

Trembling, I tell her, 'You have no idea the power you have over me. How much does your opinion mean to me? How much I look up to you.'

Part: 12

Kelly- 2 fingers in the hole, she is snapchatting.

≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister... ≈

Margot's face screws up like a fist; she is holding back tears. 'You know what Mommy would always say to me?' She lifts her chin higher. "Take care of your sisters.' So that is what I did. I have always tried to put you and Kellie first. Do you have any idea how hard it was being so far away from you guys? How lonely was it? All I wanted to do was come back home, but I could not because I had to be strong. I must be' she struggles for breath, a good example. I can't be weak. I must show you guys how to be brave.

~\*~

Because – 'because Mommy is not here to do it.'

Tears roll down my cheeks. 'I know. You do not have to tell me, Gogo.

I know how much you do for us.'

'But then I left, and it's like you didn't need me as much as I thought.' Her voice breaks. 'You were fine without me.'

'Only because you taught me everything!' I cry out.

Margot's face crushes like.

'I'm sorry,' I weep. 'I'm so sorry.'

'I needed you, Liv, Jenn- and girls.'



She takes one step toward me and

I take one toward her, and we fall into each other's arms, crying, and the relief I feel is immeasurable. We are sisters, and there's nothing she or I can ever say or do to change that.

Daddy knocks on the door. 'Girls?

Everything okay there?'

We look at each other and together at the same time, we say, 'We're fine, Daddy.'

IT'S NEW YEAR'S EVE. New Year's Eve has always been a stay-at-home holiday for us. We make popcorn and drink sparkling cider, and at midnight we go outside to the backyard and light up sparklers.

Some of my friends from high school are having a party at a cabin in the woods, and she said she wasn't going to go, that she'd rather stay with us, but Kellie and I made her. I hope that- Marcel is going too, and that they'll talk, and who knows what will happen. It's New Year's Eve, after all.

The night of new beginnings.

We sent Daddy to a party someone from the hospital is throwing. Kellie ironed his favorite button-down shirt, and I picked the tie, and we shoved him out the door. I think Grandma is right; it's not good to be alone.

'Why are you still sad?' Kellie asks me as I dump the popcorn into a bowl for us. We're in the kitchen; she's sitting on a stool at the breakfast bar with her legs dangling. The puppy is curled up like a centipede under her stool, gazing up at Kellie with hopeful eyes. 'You and Maggie made up. What's to be sad about?'

I'm about to deny being sad, but then I just sigh and say, 'I don't know.' Kellie grabs a handful of popcorn and drops a few kernels on the floor, which Jamie gobbles up. 'How can you not know?'

'Because sometimes you just feel sad, and you can't explain it.'

Kellie cocks her head to the side.

'PMS?'

I counted the days since my last period. 'No. It is not PMS. Just because a girl is sad, it does not mean it has anything to do with PMS.'

'Then why?' She presses.

'I do not know! I miss someone.'

'You miss Marcel?'

I hesitate. 'Marcel.' Despite everything, Marcel.

'So-o call him.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

I do not know how to answer her.

It is all so embarrassing, and I want to be someone she can look up to. But she's waiting, her little brow furrowed, and I know I must tell her the truth.

'Kellie, it was all fake. The whole thing. We were never together. He never really liked me.'

Kellie wrinkles. 'What do you mean it was fake?'

Sighing, I say, 'It all started with those letters. Remember how my hatbox went missing?' Kellie nods. 'I had letters inside, letters I wrote to the boys I loved. They were supposed to be private; they were never supposed to be sent, but then somebody did, and everything turned into a mess.'

Marcel got one, and Marcel got one, and I was just so humiliated. Marcel and I decided to pretend to date so I could save face in front of Marcel, and he could make his ex-girlfriend jealous, and the whole thing just spun out of control.' Kellie is biting her lip nervously. 'Lara Jean - if I tell you something, you have to promise not to be mad.'

'What? Just tell me.'

'First promise.'

'Okay, I promise I won't be mad.' Prickles are going up my spine.

In a rush, Kellie says, 'I'm the one who sent the letters.'

'What?' I scream.

'You promised you wouldn't be mad!'

'What?' I scream again, but less loud. 'Kellie, how could you do that to me?'

She hangs her head. 'Because I was mad at you. You were teasing me about liking Marcel; you said I was going to name my dog after him. I was so mad at you.'

So, when you were sleeping- I snuck into your room and stole your hatbox, and I read all your letters, and then I sent them. I regretted it right away, but it was too late.'

'How did you even know about my letters?' I yell...

She squints at me. 'Because I go through your stuff sometimes when you're not at home.'

I am about to scream at her some more, and then I remember how I read Maggie's letter from- Marcel and me, bite my/our tongue(s.) As calmly as I can, I say, 'Do you even know how much trouble you have caused? How could you be so spiteful to me?'

'I'm sorry,' she whispers. Fat teardrops form in the corners of her eyes, and one plops down like a raindrop. I want to hug her, to comfort her, but I am still so mad. 'It's fine,' I say in a voice that is the exact opposite of fine. None of this would have happened if she had not sent those letters.

Kellie jumps up and runs upstairs, and I think she's going to her room to cry in private. I know what I should do. I should go comfort her, forgive her for real. It's my turn to be a good instance. To be a good big sister.

I'm about to go upstairs when she comes running back into the kitchen.

With my hatbox in her arms.

WHEN IT WAS JUST Maggie- and I, my mom used to buy two of everything, blue for Maggie and pink for me. The same quilt, stuffed animal, or Easter basket in two different colors. Everything had to be fair; we had to have the same number of carrots sticks or French fries or marbles or erasers shaped like cupcakes. Except I was always losing my erasers or eating my carrot sticks too fast, and then I'd beg for just one of Margot's.

Sometimes Mommy would make her share, which even then I realized wasn't fair, that obviously, Margot shouldn't be penalized for eating her snack slowly or keeping track of her erasers. After Kellie was born, Mommy tried to do blue, pink,

and yellow, but it's just a- lot harder finding one thing in three different colors. Also, Kellie was more undeveloped than us, and we didn't want the same kinds of toys as her.

The teal hatbox might be the only gift from Mommy I got that was just for me. I didn't have to share it; this one was mine and mine alone. When I opened it, I expected to find a hat, maybe a straw hat with a floppy brim, or maybe a newsboy- but it was empty.

Part: 13

'This is for your special things,' she said. 'You can put all your most precious, most favorite, most secret things in here.'

'Like what?' I spoke.

'Whatever fits inside. Whatever you want to keep just for you.' Kellie's pointy little chin trembles and she says, 'I am sorry, Lara Jean.' When I see that, my chin trembles, I can't be mad anymore. I just can't, not even a little bit. So, I go to her, and I hug her tight. 'It's all right,' I say, and she sags against me in relief. 'You can keep the box. Put all your secrets in it.' Kellie shakes her head. 'No, it's yours. I don't want it.' She thrusts it at me. 'I put something in there for you.' I open the box, and there are notes.

Notes and notes and notes.

Marcel's notes. Marcel's notes I threw away.

'I found them when I was emptying your trash,' she says. Hastily she adds, 'I only read a couple. And then I saved them because I could tell they were important.'

I touched the one that Marcel folded into an airplane. 'Kellie - you know Marcel and I, are not getting back together, right?'

~~~

#- Hashtag: (Got mail?)

Kellie grabs the bowl of popcorn and says, 'Just read them.' Then she goes into the living room and turns on the TV. I close the box and take it with me upstairs. When I am in my room, I sit on the floor and spread them out around me.

A lot of the notes just say things like 'Meet you at your locker after school' and 'Can I borrow your chemistry notes from yesterday?' I found the spider webs' one from Halloween, plus it makes me smile. Another one says, 'Can you take the bus home today?

I want to surprise Kellie and pick her up from school, so she can show me and my car off to her friends.'

'Thanks for coming to the estate sale with me this weekend. You made the day fun. I owe you one.' 'Don't forget to pack a Korean yogurt for me!' 'If you make Marcel's dumb white- chocolate cranberry cookies and not my fruitcake ones, it's over.' I laugh out loud. And then, the one I read over and over: 'You look today. I like you in blue.'

I have never gotten a love letter before. But reading these notes like this, one after the other, it feels like I have. It's like- it's like there's only ever been, Marcel... Like everyone else that came before him, they were all to prepare me for this. I think I see the difference now, between loving someone from afar and loving someone up close. When you see them up close, you see the real them, but they also get to see the real you.

-And-

Marcel does... he sees me, and I see him. Love is scary: it changes; it can go away. That's part of the risk. I don't want to be scared anymore. I want to be brave, like Margot. It's almost a

new year, after all. Close to midnight, I gather up Kellie and the puppy and the sparklers. We put on heavy coats and I make Kellie wear a hat. 'Should we put a hat on Jennie too?' she asks me.

'He doesn't need one,' I tell her.

'He's already got on a fur coat.'

The stars are out by the dozen; they look like faraway gems. We're so lucky to live in the mountains the way we do. You just feel closer to the stars.

To heaven. I light sparklers for each of us, and Kellie starts dancing around the snow making a ring of fire with hers. She's trying to coax Jamie to jump through, but he isn't having it. All he wants to do is pee around the yard. Luckily, we have a fence, or I bet he'd pee his way down this whole block.

Marcel's bedroom light is on. I see him in the window just as he opens it and calls out, 'Song girls!'

Kellie hollers, 'Want to light a sparkler?'

'Maybe next year,' Marcel calls back. I look up at him and wave my sparkler, and he smiles, and there's just this feeling of all rightness between us. One way or another, Marcel will be in our lives. And I'm certain, I'm so suddenly certain that everything is exactly the way it's supposed to be, that I don't have to be so afraid of goodbye because goodbye doesn't have to be forever.

When I'm back in my room in my flattery nightgown, I take out my special flowy pen, and my good thick stationery and I start to write. Not a goodbye letter. Just a plain old love letter.

Dear- Marcel -

Acknowledgments-

To All My Literary Loves:

To you, fairest of them all. I think you and I might just be meant to be.

To you, for putting a ring on it.

All of my love, baby girl! <3

Look, in my opinion, the best thing you can do is find a person who loves you for exactly what you are.

Good mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, handsome, what have you, the right person is still going to think the sun shines out your ass. That's the kind of person that's worth sticking with.

Part: 14

Come show showing the chat lines, she is masturbating, with over 2,000 boys loving her for making them explode, on the screen for her to see, yet only if you're her top pick. ≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister... ≈ she has become a mini-me...

More and more it has been occurring to me that this, too, will change our procedures. She'll retreat to the North End and make friends with her neighbors, with people richer, and more sophisticated than I am. I'll stay in some crappy apartment in Ebensburg, and I won't miss her, or remember what it felt like to run side by side.

They've warned me that after my procedure I may not even like running anymore, period. Another side effect of the cure: People often change their habits afterward, lose interest in their former hobbies and things that had given them pleasure.

'The cured, incapable of strong desire, are thus rid of both remembered and future pain' ('After the Procedure,' The Safety, Health, and cheerfulness.)

~*~

The world is spinning by people and streets along, unfurling ribbon of color and sound. We ran past St. Vincent's, the biggest all-boys school in town. A half-dozen boys are outside playing basketball, lazily dribbling the ball around, calling to one another.

Their words are a blur, an indistinct series of shouts and barks and short bursts of laughter, the way that boys always sound whenever they're together in groups, whenever you only hear them from around corners or across streets or down the beach. It's like they have a language all their own, and for about the thousandth time, I think how glad I am that segregation policy keeps us separate most of the time. As we run by me-think- I sense a momentary pause, a fraction of a second when all their eyes lift and turn in our direction. I'm too embarrassed to look.

My whole body goes white-hot like someone's just stuck me headfirst into an oven. But a second later I felt their eyes sweeping past me, a wind, latching on to Hana. Her blond hair flashes next to me, a coin in the sun.

The pain is creeping back into my legs, a leaden feeling, but I force myself to keep going as we around the corner of 219- Maine- Juniper Street and Laurel St. Vincent's behind. I feel Hana straining to keep up next to me. I turn my head, barely managing to gasp out, 'Duel you.' But as Hana pulls up, arms pumping and nearly passes me, I put my head down and lunge forward, cycling my legs as fast as I can, trying to suck air into my lungs, which feel like they've shrunk to the size of a pea, fighting the screaming in my muscles.

Blackness eats the edges of my vision, and all I can see is the chain-link fence that rises in front of us suddenly, blocking our path, and then I'm reaching out and attacking it so hard it begins to shake, turning around to yell, 'I won!' as Hanna pulls up a second behind me, gasping for breath.

Both of us are laughing now, hiccupping and taking huge gulping breaths of air as we pace around in circles, trying to walk it off. When she can finally breathe again, Hanna straightens up, laughing. 'I let you win,' she says, an old joke of ours. I toe some gravel in her direction. She ducks away, shrieking. 'Keep telling yourself that.'

My hair has come out of its pigtail, and I wrestle it out of its flexible, flipping my head down so I get the wind on my neck. Sweat drips down into my eyes, stinging.

'Nice look.' Hana pushes me lightly, and I stumble sideways, whipping my head up to swipe back at her. She sidesteps me. There's a gap in the chain-link fence that marks the beginning of a narrow service road.

This is blocked by a low metal gate. Hana hopes it and gestures for me to follow. I haven't been paying attention to where we are: The service drives threads down through a parking lot, a forest of industrial Dumpsters and cargo storage sheds.

Yonder those are the familiar string of white square buildings, like giant teeth. This must be one of the side entrances of the lab complex. I see now that the chain-link fence is looped on top with barbed wire and marked at twenty-foot intervals with signs that all read: PRIVATE PROPERTY. NO!

TRESPASSING, AUTHORIZED EMPLOYEES- ONLY.

Part: 15

'I don't think we're supposed to-' I start to say, but Hana cuts me off. 'Come on,' she calls out. 'Live a little.' I do a quick scan of the parking lot beyond the gate and the road behind us: no one. The small guard hut just past the gate is also empty. I lean over and peek inside.

There's a half-eaten sandwich sitting on wax paper, and a stack of books piled messily on a small desk next to an old-fashioned radio, which is spitting static and patchy bits of music into the silence. I don't see any Surveillance cameras, either, though there must be some. All the government buildings are wired. I hesitate for a second longer, then swing myself over the gate and catch up to Hanna. Her eyes are lit up with excitement, and I can tell that this was her plan, and her destination, all along.

~*~

'This must be how the Invalids got in,' she says in a breathless rush, as though we've been talking about-yesterday's drama at the labs all this time.

'Don't- you think?' 'Doesn't seem like it would have been hard.' I'm trying to sound casual but the whole thing- the empty service road, and the enormous parking lot, like- the high overpasses, sparkling in the sun, the cobalt dumpsters and the electrical wires across the sky, the sparkling white slope of the lab roof- smack's me uneasy. Everything is silent and very still-frozen, almost, the way things are in a dream, or just before a chief cloudburst.

I don't want to say it to Hanna, but I'd give pretty much anything to head back to Old Port, to the complex nest of familiar streets and stores. Even though there's no one around, I have the impression of being watched. It's worse than the ordinary feeling of being observed in school and on the street and even at home, having to be cautious about what you do and

say, the close, blocked-in feeling that everyone gets used to eventually.

‘Yeah...’ Hana kicks at the packed dirt road. A plume of dust puffs up, resettles slowly. ‘Pretty crappy security for a major medical facility.’

‘Pretty crappy security for a petting zoo,’ I say.

‘I resent that.’ The voice comes from behind us, and both Hana and I jump.

I spin around. The world seems to freeze for an instant.

A boy is standing behind us, arms crossed, head cocked to the side. A boy with caramel-colored skin and hair that’s a golden-brown color, like autumn leaves getting ready to fall.

Part: 16

It’s him... The boy from yesterday, from the observation deck. The Invalid... Except he isn’t an Invalid.

He’s wearing a short-sleeved navy guard’s uniform over jeans, and he’s got a laminated government ID clipped to his collar.

‘I leave for two seconds to get a refill’-he gestures to the bottle of water he’s holding’ and I come back to find a full-fledged break-in.’

I’m so confused I can’t move or speak or do anything. Hanna must think I’m scared because she jumps in quickly, ‘We weren’t breaking in. We weren’t doing anything. We were just running and we - hum, we got lost.’

The boy crosses his arms in front of his chest, rocking back on his heels. ‘Didn’t see any of the signs outside, huh? ‘No Trespassing’? ‘Authorized Personnel Only?’ Hana looks away.

She's panicky too. I can feel it. Hana's a thousand times...

More confident than I am, but neither of us is used to standing in the open and talking to a boy, especially not a bodyguards, and it must have occurred to Hana that he already has plenty of grounds to arrest us.

'Must have missed them,' she... Mumbles...

'Uh-huh.' He raises his eyebrows. It's obvious he doesn't believe us, but at least he doesn't look angry. 'They're pretty subtle. Solitary a few dozen- of them. I can see how you might not have noticed.'

He looks away for a second, squinting, and I get the feeling he's trying to stop himself from laughing. He's not like any guard I have ever seen- at least, not the typical guards you see at the border and all-around Pitt, fat, and slow and old. I think about how sure I was in the recent past that he came from the Wilds, the solid certainty deep inside of me. I was wrong. As he turns his head, I see the unmistakable sign of someone who is cured: the mark of the procedure, a three-pointed star, just behind the left ear, where the scientists insert a special three the pronged needle used exclusively for immobilizing the patient so that the cure can be administered. Individuals show off their scars like badges of honor; you hardly see any curds with long hair, and the women who haven't lopped off their hair entirely are careful to wear it pulled back.

Part: 17

My fear recedes. Talking to a cured... Isn't illegal. The rules of segregation don't apply...

I'm not sure if he has recognized me or not. If so, he hasn't given any sign of it. In conclusion- I can't take it anymore,

and I burst out, 'You, I saw you...' At the last second, I can't finish the sentence. I saw you yesterday.

You winked at me.

~*~

Hana looks startled. 'You two know each other?' She shoots a look at me.

Hana knows I have hardly ever exchanged two words with a boy before, unless it's 'Excuse me' in the street or 'Sorry for stepping on your toes' when I trip on somebody.

We're not supposed to have more than minimal contact with uncured boys outside of our own families. Even after they've been cured, there's hardly a need or excuse for it, unless we are dealing with a doctor or teacher or someone like that.

He turns to look at me. His face is completely professional and composed, but then again, I swear I see something flickering in his eyes, a look of amusement or pleasure. 'Nope,' he says smoothly. 'We have never met. I'm sure I will remember.' The flash in his eyes is back -is he laughing at me?

'I'm Hanna,' Hanna says. 'And this is Jenn.' She jabs me with an elbow. I know I must look like a fish, standing there with my mouth gaping open, but I'm too outraged to speak. He's lying. I know he's the one I saw yesterday, would bet my life on it.

Part: 18

'Marcel- nice to meet you.' Marcel keeps his eyes on me as he and his hands.

Then he extends a hand to me. 'Jenn,' she says thoughtfully. 'I've never heard that name before.' I hesitate. Shaking hands makes me feel awkward like I'm playing dress-up in an adult's too-big clothing. Besides, I have never essentially touched skin-to-skin with a stranger. But he's just standing there with his hand out, so after a second, I reach out and shake. The moment we touch, a tiny electrical shock calls through me, and I pull away quickly.

'It's short for Maggie,' I say.

'Maggie.' Marcel tips his head back, watching me with narrowed eyes.

'Pretty.'

I'm momentarily distracted by the way he says my name. In his mouth, it sounds musical, not clunky and angular, the way my teachers have always made it sound.

Love is in the air... like music!

Part: 19

His eyes are a warm amber color, and as I look at him, I have a sudden, flashing memory of my mother pouring syrup over a stack of pancakes. I look away, feeling ashamed, as though he has somehow been responsible for dredging the memory up, has reached in with his hand, and wrenched it from me.

Awkwardness makes me feel irritated, and I press on, 'I do know you. I saw you yesterday in the labs.

You were on the observation deck, watching- observing everything.'

Again, my courage fails me at the last second and I do not say, watching me. I can feel Hanna glaring at me, but I ignore her. She must be furious I had not told her any of this.

Part: 20

Marcel's face does not change. He does not blink or drop his smile for even a fraction of a second. 'Cause of mistaken identity, I guess. Guards are not allowed in the labs during evaluations. Especially not part-time guards.' For a second longer, we stand there, staring at each other. Now I know he is lying, and the easy, lazy grin on his face makes me want to reach out and slap him.

I ball my fists and suck in a deep breath, willing myself to stay calm. I am not the violent type. I do not know why I am feeling so aggravated.

Hanna jumps in, breaking the tension. 'So, this is it? A part-time security guard and some 'Keep Out' signs?'

Marcel keeps his eyes on me a half-second longer. Then he turns to look at Hanna as though noticing her for the first time. 'What do you mean?'

'I would have thought the labs would be better protected, that is all. It does not seem like it would be too hard to break into this place.'

Part: 21

Marcel raises his eyebrows.

'Thinking about attempting?' Hanna freezes, and my blood goes to ice. She has gone too far. If Alex reports us as possible supporters, or troublemakers, or anything, we're in for months and months of surveillance and investigation- besides, we can kiss our chances of passing the evaluations with decent

scores goodbye. I picture looking for a lifetime of watching ANNA Kendrick do things for me!

Marcel must sense our fear because he raises both hands. 'Olivia. I was kidding. You don't exactly seem like terrorists.' It occurs to me how ridiculous we must look in our running shorts and sweaty tank tops and neon sneakers. Or at least, I must look ridiculous. Hanna looks like a model for athletic wear. Again, I feel a fit of blushing coming on, followed by a surge of irritation. Nope- wonder the regulators decided on the separation of boys and girls: else, it would have been a nightmare, this feeling livid, self- conscious, disordered, and annoyed all the time.

Kellie- My daddy said- that my one pap passed from a planned rockfall- what is that? That one of the girls did it the taller one.

~*~

'This is just the stacking area, anyway, for freight and stuff.' Marcel gestures out there the line of consignment sheds. 'Real security starts closer to the facilities. Full-time guards, cameras, electrified fence, the whole shebang.' Hanna doesn't look at me, but when she speaks, I can hear the excitement creeping into her voice. 'The loading area? Like, where are the deliveries coming from?' In my head I start praying, don't say anything stupid. Don't say anything dumb. Do not mention the Invalids.

'You got it.'

Hanna dances on her feet, shifting her weight back and forth. I try to shoot her a warning look, but she avoids my eyes.

'So, this is where the trucks come from?

With medical equipment and - and other stuff?'

'Faithfully.' O'er I have the impression of something flickering behind Marcel's eyes, even as the rest of his face stays neutral. I don't trust him, I realize, and again wonder why he is lying about being in the labs yesterday.

Only because it is forbidden as he said. Maybe because he was laughing instead of trying to help. And, after all, he does not recognize me. We made eye contact for only a few seconds, and I am sure to him I was only a blurry, in-between face, easy to forget. Not pretty. Not that ugly, either.

Only plain, like a thousand other faces you would see on the street.

~*~

Hands- oh hands and holding them...

He, on the other hand, is most definitely not in-between. There is something insane to me about standing in the open talking to a strange boy, even if he is cured, and though my head is whirling, it is like my vision gets razor-sharp, making everything look ultra-detailed. I notice the way a piece of his hair curls around his scar, like a surround; I notice his large brown hands and the whiteness of his teeth and the perfect symmetry of his face. His jeans are faded and belted low on his hips, and the laces in his sneakers are the strangest ink-color blue like he has colored them in with a pen.

Thoughts oh thoughts and having them...

I think about you, this is true, what to do, it has known me and you!

I wonder how old he is. He looks my age, but he must be slightly older, fourteen now. I wonder, too-a brief, flitting thought- whether he has already been paired. But of course, he has; he must have been.

I have been staring at him unintentionally and he turns suddenly to look at me. I drop my eyes, feeling a quick, besides, unreasonable trepidation that he has managed to read my thoughts.

‘I had love to look around,’ Karly hints not- so-so delicately. I reach out and pinch her when Marcel is not looking, in addition to her psychoanalysts away, giving me a guilty look. At least she does not start grilling him about what happened former times and get us thrown in the penitentiary or dragged through questioning, interrogating, and enquiring.

Marcel softball pitches his water magnum in the air, catches it in one small hand. ‘Trust me, there’s zero to see- and crap. Unless you are a fan of industrial waste. There is enough of that from one place to another here.’ He tips his head toward the dumpsters.

‘Oh- plus the best view of the bay in Pitt. She put all the yellow and black things over the wither- We have got that going for us too.’

‘Really?’ Karly wrinkles her nose momentarily distracted from her detective assignment.

Marcel nods, tosses the bottle again, catches it. As it arcs through the air the sun winks through the water like light from a charm. ‘That I can show you,’ he says. ‘Come on now.’ All I want is to get out of here, but Karly says, ‘Sure, thing,’ so-o I trudge along after her, mutely cursing her curiosity and obsession with all things invalid- related and swearing never to let her pick out running routes again.

Marcel and I walk in front, and I pick up scattered bits of their têteàtête: I hear him say he takes classes at one of the colleges but misses what he says he studies; Hanna tells him we

are about to graduate. He tells her he is fourteen I think; she says that we are both turning I think in several months.

Appreciatively, they avoided talking about the botched evaluations yesterday. The service road connects with another, lesser drive, which runs parallel to Facade Street, slanting precipitously uphill toward the northern boardwalk.

Part: 22

See us-

Here there are rows of long, metal storage sheds. The sun is flat, high, and unrelenting. I'm exceedingly thirsty, but when Marcel turns around and offers me a sip from his water bottle, I say, 'Nope,' hurriedly and too flamboyant. The thought of putting my mouth where his mouth has been making me feel anxious all over again.

As we come up to the top of the hill- all three of us panting a little from the climb- the bay unfolds to our right like an enormous map, a sparkling, shimmering world of blues and greens.

Hanna gasps a little.

It is a beautiful view: unobstructed, and just oh so perfect. The atmosphere is full of puffy white clouds that make me think of feather pillows, and seagulls turn lazy arcs over the water, patterns of birds forming and dissolving in the sky.

Hanna, not Karly walks forward a few feet. 'It's amazing... So- freakin' gorgeous, isn't it? No matter how long I live here I never get used to it.' She turns and looks at me. 'I think this is my favorite way to see the ocean.'

Middle of the afternoon, sunny and bright. It's just like- a photograph- and that shit. Don't you think, Liv?' I'm feeling so

relaxed- relishing the wind at the top of the hill, which sweeps over my arms, and legs, hips, boobs and makes me feel cool and delicious, enjoying the view of the bay and the high, blinking eye of the sun- I've almost forgotten that Marcel is with us. He's been droopy back, standing a few feet behind us, and ever since we came up the hill, he ought to say a word.

Which is why I nearly jump out of my skin when he leans forward and directs a solitary word into my ear: 'Ashen.' 'Come again...?' I whirl around, my heart beating, pounding, and hitting on so very hard.

Part: 23

The lookback: the dubbed take the wanting- Hanna has turned and twisted back to the water and is going on about wishing she had her camera and how you never seem to have anything you need.

Ray is bent close to me so close I can see his eyelashes, like perfect brushstrokes on a canvas portrait, besides now his eyes are like literally dancing with light, and with me, I feel them move in my and I feel dirty, burning as though on fire. For the lust and the lust- I must have with this boy, not love. I want to get lost... I am in- love with...? You pick... IDK (I don't know) at this point.

'What did you say?' I repeat. My voice comes out a croaky whisper. Ray leans another inch closer, and it's like the flames seep out of his eyes and light my whole body on fire. I have never- ever been this close- to a boy before. I feel like fainting and running all at the same time. But I can't move.

'I said, I prefer the ocean when it's grim. Or not gray. A pale, in-between color. It runs by me again, waiting for something good to happen.'

Ray does remember- all advantageous everything never- ever forget. He was there. The ground is dissolving under my feet the way it does in the dream about my mother. All I can see are his eyes, the shifting pattern of shadow and light turning there.

‘You perjure yourself,’ I manage to croak out.

‘Why did you lie?’

Ray doesn’t answer me. He pulls away a few inches and says, ‘Of course it’s even prettier at sunset. around eight-thirty the sky looks like it’s on fire, especially at Back and Gold Cove. You should see it.’ He pauses, and though his voice is low; as well as unpremeditated I get the feeling, he is trying to tell me something important.

‘Tonight, it will most likely be amazing!!!’

My mind grinds into action, unhurriedly processing his words, the way he’s emphasizing definite details.

Then it clicks: He has given me time, besides a place. He’s telling me to meet him. ‘Are you asking me to-?’ I start to say, but just then Karly innings back up to me, grabbing my arm.

‘God,’ she says, snickering. ‘Can you believe it’s after five already?’

‘We’ve got to go.’ She’s dragging me retrograde before- I can respond or protest, and by the time I think to look over my shoulder above my armpit adjacent my side boob, to see if Marcel is watching or giving me any kind of sign, he has disappeared from view.

I’ll I want-

Is him...

Or her...

Or her...

Or him...

Or love...

Can I have both...? (She asked sweetly) without payback for it! (Pouting face and stomping of her left foot.)

Part: 24

'Maggie- 'Mom! Mom! Mom!

Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! Mama!

Mama! Mama! Ma! Ma! Ma! Ma!

Mum! Mum! Mum! Mum! Mummy!

Mama, Mama...'

Shit!

Help me get home. I'm out in the woods, I am out on my own. I found a werewolf, a horrid old pooch. It showed me its teeth and went straight for my gut.

Mama, Mama, help me get home. I'm out in the woods, I am out on my own.

I was stopped by an angel, a rotting old wreck. It showed me its teeth and went straight for my neck.

Mama, Mama, put me to bed, I won't make it home, I'm already half dead. I met an Invalid, and fell for his art. She showed me her smile and went straight to my heart.

~*~

When I'm setting the table for dinner, I by chance pour wine in Kellie juice cup and orange juice in my uncle's wine glass, and while I'm grating cheese, I for one caught my knuckles so many times in the teeth of the grater my aunt finally sends me- out of the kitchen, saying she had preferred not to have a topping of skin for her ravioli.

I can't stop thinking about the last thing Marcel said to her, the forever and always- shifting pattern of his eyes, the strange expression on his face- like he was inviting me. around seven-thirty- the sky looks like it's on fire, especially at Back and Gold Cove. You should see it...

Is it even remotely, imaginably possible he was sending me a message?

Is it possible he was asking me to meet...?

Him...?

Part: 25

Dizzy- dizzy- dizzy- dizzy- dizzy- dizzy!!!

Am I...!

The idea makes me wobbly, faint- shaky- lightheaded- and dazed! I keep thinking, too, about the single word, directed low and quietly straight into my ear: Steely. He was there; he saw me; he evoked me.

So many inquiries gathering my wits at once, it is, and like one of the famous Pittsburgh (Pitt.) Fogs have swept up from the ocean and settled there, making it impossible to think normal, functional thoughts.

My aunt finally notices something is wrong. Just before dinner, I am helping Jenny with her homework, as always, testing her on her multiplication tables. We are sitting on the

floor of the living room, which is squashed up right next to the 'dining room' (an alcove that scarcely holds a table and seventh chairs,) as well as I am holding her workbook on my knees, reciting the problems to her, but my mind is on autopilot and my thoughts are a million miles away.

Otherwise rather, they are exactly 3.5 miles away, down at the marshy edge of Back and Gold Cove. I know the distance exactly because it is a nice run from my house.

Now I am calculating how quickly- I could get down there on my bike, and then beat myself up for even considering the idea.

'Seven times eight?'

Jenny pinches her lips together. 'Fifty-sixth to the one.' she said- dumbly!

'Nine times six?'

'Fifty-two- da- four-sh.' She said- oh so- moronically.

On the other hand, no law says you cannot speak to a curd.

Curds are safe. They can be mentors or guides to- the un-curd. Even though Marcel is- only- only a year older than I am- I think...? - Right? We are separated, irreparably, and totally, by the procedure. He might as well be my grandfather.

'Seven times eleven?'

'Seventy-seven- one 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. somewhere in there, it is.'

~*~

'Liv.' My aunt has squeezed out of the kitchen, past the dining room table, and is standing behind Jenny. I blink twice,

trying to focus. Carol's face is tight with concern. 'Is something the matter?'

'Nope.' I drop my eyes quickly. I hate it when my aunt looks at me like that, like she is reading all the bad parts of my soul. I feel guilty just for thinking about a boy, even a cured one. If she knew, she would say, o-Oh, Liv. Careful.

Dredge up what happened to your mother. She would say, these diseases tend to run in the blood.

'Why?'

I keep my eyes trained on the worn carpet underneath me. Carol bends forward, swoops up Jenny's workbook from my knees, and says loudly in her clear, high voice, 'Nine times six is fifty-four tenths.' She snaps the workbook closed. 'Not fifty-two, Liv. I assume you know your multiplication tables?' Jenny sticks her tongue out at me.

My cheeks start heating up as I realize my mistake. 'Sorry. I guess I am just kind of - distracted.'

There is a momentary pause. My eyes never leave the back of my neck. I can sense them burning there. I feel like I will shriek, or cry, or confess if she keeps staring at me.

Finally, she sighs. 'You're still sophisticated about the evaluations, aren't you?' I blow the air out of my cheeks, feel a weight of anxiety ease off my chest.

'Affirmative. I guess so.' I venture a glance up at her, and she smiles her little skittering smile.

'I know you're disappointed- you have to go through the procedure again but think about it this way- this time you will be even more equipped.'

Interval: 6

Midnight Sun

Interval Two-

Chapter: 18

Dumb love

Marcel's oldest brother is Daved.

Marcel tried not to think about how often, as a kid, those same legs had pumped him forward during a footrace and propelled her into trees when they had climbing wars. She had always been strong- as hard as polished timber, scrappy, and made of muscle. Stronger than most boys, and braver, too. For Marcel's whole life, she had been his best friend, his partner in crime.

(One year forward after high school.)

Liv- She was two years older than him and had been the de facto leader of whatever scheme or game they had invented. When he was five, they had bottled their farts and tried to sell them. Olivia! Only in Pennsylvania would parents throw a dropping-out-of-college party for their daughter. Now, to be fair, the invitations did not acknowledge the whole dropping-out bit. Nothing as crass as that. I mean, this is Indiana University of Pennsylvania. People have standards. At least when other people are watching. See, the twelve one-dollars-each invitations rolled the whole debacle as a 'sending-off celebration for Olivia.'

Sending-off indeed. Not exactly. At least they got the location right, although even that is a bit of a joke. It is not exactly Rwanda or Haiti or any of the places that Olivia originally intended to go to save the world.

But when your parents know someone who knows someone who knows everyone, you're bound to get hooked up with someone who needs help a little closer to home. But the whole do-gooder motivation?

Total bullsh*t, I should know, it's been that way since the beginning of the end.

See, I'm Olivia IUP drop-out and soon-to-be resident of Middle- of- Nowhere. And let me tell you, my reasons have nothing to do with charity. I am not that good. Not even close. I certainly don't deserve a freaking party for the things I have done. But I'm from Indiana. Parties are what we do. At this point, I'm just counting myself lucky. I talked to my mother asking to stay home and not get kicked out. I know why I can make it on my own, I see that now, yet I didn't when I was in high school that is for sure.

Money is hard to come by when you make two dollars an hour, working your ass off, busing tables. Pa. -wages suck! Like the cops in my hometown all sh*tting through the same whole. Sucking each other off, in the backroom, doing nothing but buying new cars. That's all there good for covers some assholes ass, that takes their sh*t.

I wish I were kidding about both here, yet I am not. So here I am, dressed in a brand- new cute mélange dress, trying to make everyone believe, I was bitten by the humanitarian bug just in time to bail on my first year of college in music. I would be better, yet I left the band for Jenny also.

The most depressing thing is that everyone seems willing to just go with it as I did, things you do just to be cool make you lose yourself in the long run- doesn't it not? Well done, Liv! So proud of you, Olivia! I said to myself when I got all F's Lovely inside and out, I feel now. You can spend all your time doing boys or at the beach when you have no life or money to

pay for a living- A-Okay- life... money is everything that makes the world go around. I wised up to this fast, in the first week of leaving home, when I was kicked out, begging to come back and suck on mom sh*t just to eat. Feel like corn?

My best friend, at least, doesn't seem to be buying it. 'Liv, you can't be serious. I mean, where are you going to get your hair highlighted and your designer clothes?' I am not... I spoke. A good wheel is where I must shop now, and I wear what I have. Some part of me that deeply wants to snap at my oldest friend to stop being so superficial. But the other part of me- the more familiar one- is dying to grab her by the shoulders and give her an oh- my- flipping God-I- know!

Because, the truth is, I have spent way too much time wondering about how I'm going to keep my honey-blond hair just right now from returning to its natural mud color while in the God-awful hometown of mine. I have had the same hairdresser since our mothers decided it was time, we became versed in the difference between highlights and lowlights.

I was inseparable long before that.

Julyan Gorllie- She was the cute brunette to my classy blonde all through twelve years of private school.

Olivia taught me the art of rolling my plaid uniform skirt just enough to be interesting without being obvious, and in return, I was her explanation when she let Eliyn talk her out of her couture lavender dress on prom night at the college. Even when Julyan went off to Pittsburgh to meet up with her girlfriend since she dropped out.

They hooked up and wanted it to go more like meeting mom and dad. Both made a pact to see each other at least a couple of times a month. So, far- like- they have stuck to it.

Two months ago, this was, she has been telling me she will be my best friend no matter what (the no matter what, of course, is the not so minor fact that I will not be finishing my first year with a degree, someday soon, I have spent what seems like years racing after.) Oh, deep down, we both know things have changed.

Phone calls just are not the same, I do not have one now. I cannot afford one, I need gas for the car I can make payments for like I to have five dollars to spare when all but two go in the tank that I make.

Weekend nights are different from parties and flunk out or read in the dorm and pass what would you do in my shoes? College is an expansive way to party your butt off. I can say that much- do you want to pay the eighty grand I owe. Dreaming at this point is the height of stupidity like smoking and doing drugs, I must think about the clock inside me running too. I want to think about that one too a boy may be on the way, if this does not work out this time, the last girl broke my heart, and a sex change is what I need in a lover.

~*~

'I'll be home for Thanksgiving,' I say by way of response to her email. I see in the school library a place I thought I would never- ever be, just like being in horror over my hair crisis, in high school, it was a no-no! 'I'll make an appointment when I have some change to spare.'

~*~

My best friend purses her glossy lips and takes a sip of pink cava- a tiny one, since champagne has carbs, and Julian lives in constant fear that her hourglass figure will turn lumpy before she can make it down the aisle in a size- 0 wedding

dress. Where lovers yet we come to the point we feel we need boys in our lives too.

It is a big step for a girl that was Bi. I not so anymore, I do not know I am getting too old for all this nonsocial sh*t, and love games. The fun was nice, and it lasted, before I may have to look at it and get on with it. 'So- three-plus months, we did think your mom would call in sick.' She says, giving my hair a once-over. And kiss me goodbye, 'Your ends might survive it if you don't flatiron your hair, but the roots... ugh- love yeah- see you around.' It was a flirty fling- if you want to call it that, we all have in college, I did.

'Maybe- I could just wear a bag over my head instead of, like my dart pillow- and wishing I were dead, all freaked up, and sped- in the head- days like this I wish I were ahead, with the story's all read.

Like the preps the jocks, hitting them all that step on my block, I know what I got a hanging sock filled with rocks, I am about to hit anyone that steps on my block, I hate on the preps and the jocks, with their nice polo shirts and matching socks, throwing at me like a rock on glass, as they pass.

Just another sauced- like her, oh- I am sorry- I did not want it this way, but what you are it if it will never change, I will just be another left behind, life is unkind, I did want it this way, and yet what good is it always, I will be left behind.' This is here to show you all that I did it! Plus, I am not stopping! Living life on rewind... what do you say about that? I am the only one that would get that, aren't you? Just like all of you I know that you have too. You cannot define it, this life that you live. All the anger let it out, LET IT OUT!'

Chapter: 19

Tonic

I say, taking a sip of my champagne. A bigger ship than her, because unlike my curvy friend, I am more of the willowy (read: flat chested) type, and if my parents' genetics are any indication, my beanpole figure will outlast my teeth.

Being able to legally drink at my parents' frequent social gatherings is the only good thing about getting older. I suspect that is one of the reasons the drinking age is twenty-one. It is as though some wise person way back knew that alcohol would start to be helpful at that point in your life.

I am twenty-two, and God knows I have found a drink handy a time or two. Especially in the last year.

I catch a whiff of candy-scented perfume a second before an arm goes around my waist.

'You'll never guess who dared to show his face,' my friend Andrea murmurs in my ear. 'And he brought her.' She and he are giving me that wary, wide-eyed look that everyone gets when Ethan Price and I are in the same room, and before I know it, I am flanked by four of my other friends, all identical in jewel-colored cocktail dresses and designer high heels. I do not have to turn around to know that the girl- Maddie is so concerned about will not be matchy-matchy with anyone. Ethan's new girlfriend has a distinct style that the socially polite set refers to as unique and the total snobs among us would call weird. In my circle, there is nothing worse than weird.

'Marcel and Karly are perfectly wired together, and that is perfectly right for them, or so they both say.'

Olivia and her new love: 'You want to talk about it?' she asks, not looking up. 'I wouldn't even know where to start.' 'She does tend to have that effect on people. They come in expecting to feel kindly but walk away wanting to strangle her.' 'That

about sums it up,' I say, tracing a finger through the flour dusting the counter. 'But you're saying this to me?' She asks.

That I may want a boy now, and that we need to see others, it is not you- it is me. I press my lips together as I consider the thoughts of letting finding new love. Like the thought of the taste and feel of her lips pressed to mine, it felt so right to me. I do not want to stay that do not want me in their life anymore, she said with disappointment. Yet there was some regret in her eyes and voice, I knew her so well, yet I did not at all really, you know what kind of love you have where you want more yet no less. I want to scream at the top of my lungs and hightail my cute ass it back to her apartment as soon as I got home here now, where people buy bread and do not give a sh*t if you want to be alive or died, and where it is not so freaking quiet, or nose with the fart can cars that go by, and where were the girl do not have sexy auburn eyes and sh*tty attitudes. Sometimes like her PMS-ing or over crap.

But then I picture her smug condescension as he stared down at me from that ravaged, once-gorgeous face. I knew I would feel this way. Heck, Julyan made sure that there is nothing to hold me here, other than her love for me and mine for her. More lust than love if you want to get- down to it.

It is as though she saw right through my plan to swoop in here like a saintly guardian angel to absolve my sins, and she is telling me he is not going to play with my emotions and brain or life. Getting forgiveness is not going to be as simple as ladling soup into a weary, appreciative soul's gateway.

Maddie gives another of those half-smiles that she seems to have in endless supply. It is a smile that says, Life sucks, but it is always worth living. 'Most people don't admit how frustrating he is,' she said. 'Most of them pretend he is an absolute dear and claim they are the ones who can fix them.'

Although sometimes they do not bother to pretend, they just do. They just leave within minutes of meeting them.'

'Can't say I blame her or her,' I say, pushing away from the counter.

Looking around and back behind me. 'But it just so happens I have nowhere else to be.

-And-

I am also probably not the right person to help him, but then I do not know if there is such a thing when you are dealing with him.'

'Can we forget about the things I said when I was drunk! Sleeping with my close son- and you are gone! I am my own worst enemy, kicking my sh*t out of me.' looking out the window last night- 'Well then.' Maddie gives the dough a satisfying pat before wiping her hands on a dishtowel, I begged her to love me again for a place to live also, yet do not tell her that. 'I'll show you to your room.' The upstairs of the house- the apartment is as vast and grand as the downstairs, but its emptiness is a little frightening, she has like nothing in here. I follow Madilyn down a long series of hardwood hallways, noting that we pass a half dozen bedrooms- that is not used, not one of which is in use for anything really, they need work I can see.

Of course, they would not be her father does not live here yet he pays for her to be and own the building, and I am assuming her like my mom and her mom for life in this crud hole, in the nearby ghetto part of the town, wherever this is- it is what I call it.

Which means it is the worst of the worst being alone. Alone- is not something you want to be walking around this place? You get some you do not want or mugged. The thought

should be terrifying, and it is. But then I remember my reaction to her and her... and those girls too that are gone. That pure, undiluted surge of desirability, and now, I am frantic on top of being nervous as hell. Thinking about all this sh*t.

‘Here we go,’ Maddie says, stopping at a room on the left at the end of the hall. ‘It is not the biggest of the guest rooms, but the view’s the best in the house.

Other than the master suite, of course.’ At this point it is just kind of bed friend’s, some there to hold on to yet it is not the same for me, nor her or so I feel. We grow up some, not soft enough to hold on to in the night- so- yeah- I will go with that.

‘Is the master suite where Maddie’s father sleeps when he comes off to the home he lives in now after he left her mom also?’ I asked, stepping into the room.

Everyone seems to back up after all the deaths, at clitic joint schools. The joint meaning joined with the old oak view one next door.

Chapter: 20

Apartments

Here daddy rarely stays the night, yet I like him a lot. I could see myself with a man like that.’ She says quietly, and I overhear. Cute yet creepy all at the same time. ‘When he does, he is in the guest room, I may pop in just to see him, in a see-through night top, and see that man, It’s the only way they can keep the peace in my heart of what it could be like.’ ‘How wonderfully dysfunctional I would have it be with someone like that.’ I mutter in my mind feeling the thoughts of wetness in my brain making me hot.

But as I take in my new bedroom, I temporarily forget all about Langdon's issues, because the room looks like something out of a luxury resort.

The bed is huge, its bedding a pristine white save for the fur blanket draped across the foot of the bed. The furniture is all-natural wood and has that sort of oversized one-of-a-kind quality look that makes me think it was made locally instead of created in bulk and distributed to thousands of households.

There is a large desk in one corner, a reading chair in another, but the star of the room is the massive windows overlooking the water. 'Wow,' I whisper. 'See, we do have a few things Pittsburgh doesn't,' Maddie says, not bothering to hide the pride in her voice. 'Frenchman Bay is one of them.' I cannot argue. I have seen plenty of gorgeous views on summer vacations and spring break trips, but this ranks up there with the best of them because it is unanticipated. It is dark now, but it only adds to the appeal of the shadowy water.

The 'Bathroom's through there,' she says, gesturing to the door opposite the window. 'I put in fresh towels, and there is a small fridge next to the closet with water and a few snacks. I cook three meals a day. Not anything at all fancy, so if you need anything in between, or anything else, you are on your own.' I like how she imagined in the bright sunlight it would be postcard worthy.

'Resonances are great,' I say, giving her a small smile. 'Although I'm not hungry when I travel back and forth, I said glad to see, and be home and love you again, she knew it was a line, and a waste of time, so I'm good for tonight on the sofa maybe I crawl in with you like the old times back in the days of high school.' I got in naked, and she was in a nightgown, it came off and we did the old stuff, it was fun, some of the magic back.

We fall asleep looking out at all the lights. Her side hugged cuddling me like them. The sun rays were the alarm...

Chapter: 21

Days

Photo of me going down on my 7-inch-long toy, laying on my belly legs kicking.

≈ Past remembers of Karly ≈

Days-

I have not eaten since breakfast, but may need to eat has, without doubt, deserted me for the moments of moments. It has something to do with the fact that I have somehow gotten myself into the mother of all disasters. 'For meals, do the caretakers usually eat with her?' I ask...? Her- I want to press my lips together- yet hers with mine just for a moment or longer.

Like thing never wanting to stop.

'No. He takes all of his meals in the study, some in his bedroom. You are of course welcome to eat with Mick and me at any time, although we tend to eat in the small house.'

I like to rock into my man thing-ie replica with the two lumps at the bottom, that I use to get there, sometimes behind me sucking cupped to the wall, as she is coming tough me or him, I rock ever so easy back and forth into it, sapping my hip down on it. (Aww Ahu! Saying in a sexy sigh...)

She says it in that way people have of not expecting you to take them up on the offer, and I admit

I am a little depressed by the fact that I am expected to eat by myself. My family has always made a big deal about

sharing meals, so the thought of four people living in one home and eating separately seems strange.

Then again, eating alone seems a lot less strange than sharing a meal with Paul. As if he would even allow it, especially after the way I behaved.

Although, oddly, I still do not regret my over-the-top rudeness. It was worth it for the sheer surprise on his face. And something tells me that surprise is the only thing I will have gone for me if I want to have any chance of keeping the upper hand.

Lindy heads toward the door.

‘There is a phone in the kitchen and at the end of the hall, and both have a number listed for the small house. I usually head over there shortly after I get Paul his dinner, so if you need anything-’

‘I’ll be fine.’

But the file did not answer any of the things I wanted to know. Like whether she enjoyed that kiss yesterday or was just pretending. Whether she likes guys to hold her face or her hips when they kiss her.

Whether she has a boyfriend.

And, most important - what the freak is she doing in Maine?

-And-

‘Don’t go running alone here,’ I say. I do not bother to explain all the dangers of a woman running alone in the dark. Bar Harbor is safe enough, but all it takes is one sick freak lurking in the bushes to destroy a life.

Chapter: 22

Fooling around

At lunch- a boy asked what does- she uses and likes, so I know.

Why?

'I want to date her... is that okay?'

Maybe! You must pass my test.

Maddie- like all the girls in my group wall a have three, like most girls in the world I feel, I also have the suction cup 7 inches, a rabbit my is blue, and a hot pink seven vibrating functions rigid plastic vibrators slash dildo. You asked I have no shame in saying. I have my handbag built-in now, 'really' do you want to see- he said nothing- without even a thought she turns it on, and it bounces on the table and round the food trays. Do have it hop into someone's milk, he said.

Maddie is quite necessary of the time yet can be silly when you want her to be. She said to the girls- I have Some time- I use a flat looking-glass under me on my bed and rode it bouncing up and down on the bead meatus, letting the bed do the work, he he, leaning back downing the cowgirl, or forward for old-school freaking feeling all missionary and- aw-ah oh- yes. Karly, she likes it sideways; I do not get it?

Do you?

Karly- Madalyn all summed up she likes, fingering herself- cooking anything and everything. Singing is not always hitting the notes, yet sweetly, running, biking, swimming, outdoors hunting, I do not get that one. Jewelry makes all kinds of cool things, look at all these we have, and she has on. Take one to tell her to see if she notices.

Pole dancing working out like Zumba sh*t. Even Knitting- Knitting...??? Gardening at her apartment on her veranda porch. Photography, like of her taking pics of her more fallow and of the country land when she is there in the small towns, or school trips like D.C,

Teenage, New York, flora, and Canada. Collect Things like old radios, and records, and typewriters, one is white and platinum, with her name on it, in cloud blue. Which is worth something! Her dad loved the sh*t out of her for that one.

Suck up!

God, I need to read that one again. Yoga- yah, the only time I get into those positions is when- yah you get it.

Why not do it for fun she said? I want to get some out of me for it if I am going to bend it around like that- God! She has funny moments, of randomness too, blurting out sh*t as I do. Too much time with gaming and dumb gaming at the school always on the brown team. Dressing up in dumb sh*t like a lumberjack and once a cow, she was dry humping on me the apple in the hallway.

Pooping three times a day god- I do not sh*t in a week! 'Getting it!' Piss! Fingers! More about that pace of she over there huh- okay, she loves ballroom dancing, and asking all fairy and sh*t. Oh, piss! More...?

Sure, a boy wants to know... noses boy. Do it yourself... ask- her yourself baby- d*ick! I was thinking. Blogging whatever I ask why the freak does she want to PMS- b*tch online for anyway? I do not get...?

Where are friends that do not get one another? Belly-Dancing, God- yah no- like- do that on your red flow! Antiques- did I say that? Um- lap Dancing- 'I see it!' I see that you are one

of those dumb boy's ant' yah? Gulp- sure! he said nervously! I love making dumb boys feel awkward!!! Flower arranging... oh, Aromatherapy- 'Yeah got ah-w!' 'Boy said yeah I see we have a lot in common, hook me up!' Wink- I will see what I can do! A Boy- I do not even know his name- 'Okay,' she says, surprising me. I narrow my eyes and wait for it, and he squirms. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'I have never known a female to acquiesce that easily without a catch. How about you hit me with it now and get it over with.' I shrug. 'Fine. I was going to say that I will not freak you over if you promise to go with her, but you freak up I will cut your balls off- got it.' 'GOD! He said.' Snip- snip- I made that finger moment.

He is okay- he does not get any I can see that all over his face and down there too- so as soon as he smells some puss- puss- he will be all over her- in loving lust. I love looking down on boys! You must see if it is good enough for your girlfriend if you would do it, by looking at it is saying hello; she should not have too either. You got to feel it too so- yes. Girls get it.

Feel that hard thing-ie, moving on! I need a cold shower- God! :0 < clown!

What a goofball slash clown! It is cute, I have to say, oh boys- right...???

Dumb!!!

Chapter: 23

Squeal

Maddie- 'No,' I say, before she is finished her sentence. 'Why not?' He is your type, okay for you. I rap my cane once against the ground. 'Well, for starters, even though there are tortoises that could surpass your sorry excuse for a jog, I'm in

no shape to accompany even the most pathetic of runners.’ ‘What a handy skill you have of overloading a sentence with insults,’ she says as she reaches up to adjust her ponytail. ‘That must be helpful, what with your thriving social life and all.’ I thump my cane against the ground again, studying her. ‘Must be nice, picking on the cripple.’ Maddie rolls her eyes like I must do what with and to this boy. ‘Please. Your soul’s more crippled than your leg.’

She has no idea how right she is, and I have no intention of letting her anywhere close enough to find out. I have gotten good at shutting people out by pushing them away... being as nasty as possible until they reach their breaking point. But with her? It is different. And not only because the three-month rule she has will be more than her father’s implemented means I cannot scare her away. I, of all people, might realize that the caustic, hostile routine is not a routine at all. This girl might just figure out what I am truthfully rotten to the core.

It is better than she does; I just need to delay that realization for a while.

Three months, specifically. I am not saying I am going to be nice to her. I have no intention of going all friendly on her ass. But I will do whatever it takes to prevent her from realizing that I am deadier inside than she can know. I will do whatever it takes to ensure that little Kelly gets the treatment she needs, the same can be said for all the girls I look out for. I will not, however, accompany her on her morning ‘runs,’ and I use that word loosely.

The boy will, he freaked up he gets it, honey nut cheerios she will be having I am sure of that, he- he- he! I love it, it is time she gets it in, God, like a real on even, I like authentic! Being me! Get it in like, your only young ounces, find a boy, girls like me find a boy with the one you like! ‘There’s a treadmill in

the gym,' I say, continuing along the path. We can do it in that room at school! 'Is there? Colettlyn said.' she asks, falling into step beside me. 'Rumor has it you don't use it there with you pass meetups.' 'You know, this...?' I say as though realization just struck, in the thought of that girl. Karly said you did. 'I just had the best idea.

How about we do not do this chatty little shared morning together? You go ahead and scamper back up to the house with your flip-floppy fitting shoes, and I will continue slithering along this path alone.

Yes?'

His- joke- 'A teacher is teaching a class, and she sees that Johnny is not paying attention, so she asks him, 'If three ducks are sitting on a fence, and you shoot one, how many are left?' Johnny says, 'None.' The teacher asks, 'Why?'

Johnny says, 'Because the shot scared them all off.'

The teacher says, 'No, two, but I like how you're thinking.' Johnny asks the teacher, 'If you see three women walking out of an ice cream parlor, one is licking her ice cream, one is sucking her ice cream, and one is biting her ice cream, which one is married?' The teacher says, 'The one sucking her ice cream.' Johnny says, 'No, the one with the wedding ring, but I like how you're thinking!'

Her- Joke back- 'The teacher asked me, 'Why is your cat at school today?' I replied crying, 'Because I heard my girlfriend tell my mommy, 'I am going to eat your p*ssy so that is why she is at the school today!'

Nice!

I snorted, he was so funny, I did not want to... 'Please. Where would we talk more, online?' She is silent for a second.

'They got great chatting it up.' 'I am sure they did. By people who liked the pretty pink color.' 'What's wrong with the color?' 'For lipstick? Nothing,' I say, even though I have no idea why I am continuing this conversation. The innocuousness of it feels suspiciously standard.

'Let me guess,' she says. 'Your high school track team placed second in the state like a hundred years ago, and you're still reliving the glory?' I feel the love coming hard from inside me!

Chapter: 24

It sounds dirty

One day later- Karly- oh...? God...? hose um- down... God, you two- just freak in the lunchroom tables why do not yah! And then do something like that- yet can picture it, I am done. YAH! JUST GRAB her ASS- a boy-girl down the way said, as they were doing as they do on the Discovery channel! 'A hundred years ago? Exactly how old do you think I am?

And no, I did not run track in high school.' A thin line of my black lashes lined in and out eyes at her. 'Is that a crack about the thrash?'

'Oh yeah, can we talk about that for a second, me and liv, I see I do not need anymore?' she asks, peering down at the object in question. 'That whole snake thing is a reference to your penis, right?' Karly said you want me to kiss you, baby, it will make you feel better. Sure! She spoke.

We are so freaked up! Is Love- love, right?

Get'n it- form anyone or at any time... that how it is these days, girl breaks up one night after sex and do it with your friend the night. That is HIGH SCHOOL for a popular preppie

type, like me now. I started to look increasingly like the girl on the cam I said to Liv- 'Awah- that is okay, we all know, anyway.'

Oh- that is NICE! I am not scared to lick or take anything on my girl down there and down more than that in the backside, neither is she if they love your finger and suck it all and in-between too. I kiss every inch, every inch as she does for me.

My footsteps falter than ever before or so it felt to me. This girl looks like a poster child for a church's youth group, opposite Maddie, and the penis is so not a word I was prepared for. She loves the lord yet not a d*ick. Not in this context, anyway. 'Seriously?' I ask, annoyed at being thrown off guard. Not only does she invade my personal space and invite herself on a walk she undoubtedly was not invited on, but she is prying into my past, accusing me of being an old man with that and those do not work for her or me sometimes, and now dropping penis into conversation like we are discussing the weather.

Olivia shrugs but does not make any move to head in the opposite direction. 'I think you should have gotten a jaguar cane. That would have been cool.' 'I'm just saying this,' she says with a shrug. 'It is a serpent head, and the way you use it keeps it in the vicinity of, well... your snakehead. I figure that cannot be a coincidence.' Sweet baby Jesus. 'It is a cane.

I cannot use it and not have it in the vicinity of bull sh*t. Just never mind.

Can you please just trot along back to the house? Your Barbie shoes are going to get dirty out here.' I puckered my brow. For a second, I almost tell her that I do not need any help upping the sexy hot factor. Then I remember that I am not well, not anymore.

I am the crippled, small-town version. Looking at photos does not even remind me of that day of days and places of places.

I take a long breath of chilly morning air to keep myself from letting the despair that is lodged in my throat come rushing out in an angry bellow. If I let her see even a graying of what me is inside, she will be on her way back to my school days. In addition to alluring as that is, I need her here. At least until I formulated a plan for what to do with my life, now I asked the question, with anger, fear, and desperation.

In anticipation of that, I must keep her around in a way that does not make me want to strangle her or push her against a nearby tree and kiss her nonsensically. Or better yet, none. 'How long have you been running?' I ask, almost choking on the inane, unimportant question. It has been so long since I have had a casual conversation that it feels both unnatural and strangely familiar.

Plus, it keeps my mind off the way she fills out her pink running shirt. Practicality tells me she has got a sports bra under there- pink- but it does not stop me from fantasizing about seeing

Olivia has fewer utilitarian undergarments. 'The running thing's kind of new,' she replies, jerking, lurching, and shuddering me back to the dialogue exchange.

'Tolerant yet as soon as I am out, they suck me back into them!'

'Shocker,' I mutter out to them in a grumble.

'Well, sorry I'm not you.'

I smiled a little at her. 'That's the only sprinter you know, isn't it?'

‘Maybe. Jeez. What is it with you and running? I did not realize that track trivia would be part of the job's necessities,’ she says, her tone maddened, as we take a sharp right turn in the path, bringing us closer to the water.

‘I miss it.’ My answer is simple and a good deal more revealing than I intended.

I half expected her to mock me. To inform me that there are more important things in life than the ability to run, or to pacify me by telling me that there are other things I can do that are just as great.

Chapter: 25

Everlasting

Nods and gulps Instead, she nods, and I whip my chin off the spit, but not in a pitying way, just a quick acknowledgment of my statement. ‘I started running as an escape,’ she says after several seconds of silence. I glance down at her profile, noting that her nose is just slightly upturned and cute. ‘An outflow from what?’ She glances back at me, and our eyes collide for one charged moment. The message is clear: she will tell me her secrets when I tell her mine.

Which will never- ever... never- ever - ever happen.

‘Your inhalation all wide of the mark,’ I say, tearing my eyes away from hers.

‘My breathing is fine, I feel you 're fine, I am fine where all find to move on.’ ‘Not if you want to run more than three miles. Your breaths are too shallow with a swallow. You need to inhale deeper. Engage your diaphragm. And get used to matching the breaths to your steps. For your slow pace, inhale for three or four steps, then exhale for the same.’ ‘That seems like a lot of thinking for something that’s supposed to be

natural.' 'You'll get used to it if you suck it in harder.' 'Okay, what else?' she says, spreading her arms wide, think of your legs when you are with your girlfriend. 'Am I bowlegged? My ponytail not high enough?'

'Just start with the breathing for now,' I say, irritation running in and out starting to set in as I realize how much I want to be the one running, not the one telling somebody else how to run.

'Sure thing, Coach,' she murmurs.

'So-o, by any chance, does your sudden sympathy for running mean you want to be all by yourself?' She mopes making a sad face, with a pouting lip, and so on. 'Not really. Why?' 'Jesus, take a hint and do what is implied- already.'

'Ah. You want me to leave you to ruminate.'

'Yup-per.'

She stops walking immediately and pivots, so she is facing back toward the house. 'Fine. I will try to master your little breathing activity on the way back. Same time tomorrow?'

'Nope, find another time to run and on my time if you don't get it.' 'I'm getting paid, either way, do what you like it's wrong to do it your way, I'll keep you company, you know over here looking down on you shaking my head when you F- it up.'

'Well, do so in silence, and from far afield.'

She sighs as though I am a peevish child. 'It is shocking that none of your other companions stuck around for more than a twosome of weeks.

Shocking, I say.' 'See you later,' I say all with F- you in my mind, not at all happy with the outcome of everything, nodding with my cane back toward the house. 'See yah, I said to

my girls,' she says as she begins walking backward so that she is still finished- facing me. 'Also, fun little trivia for this morning? In the argument for your uncalled- for breathing advice?' 'No thanks, do I want more of this sh*t.'

Chapter: 26

Gaping mouth

She ignores me and points to the cane. 'That cane? All for the show. You have not used it once to support your weight this entire time.'

I open my mouth to argue, but instead, my jaw goes a little slack as it hits me.

She is right...

...And I have not once thought about my leg or my scars.

She is already jogging away from me, and I stand still for several minutes, watching her until she disappears around a bend in the path. Then I continue with my walk, telling myself I am relieved to have my solitude back. And if there is the slightest undercurrent of loneliness, I ignore it.

Olivia- After my shower, I go looking for Paul.

He is not in his library or the kitchen. Halfway back up the stairs, I heard the hard, driving music from the direction of his bedroom. I did not grow up with a brother

(Or a sister, for that matter,) but I am fairly sure all that scary guitar noise is man code for-

'Keep the hell out.'

Fine with me...

I am not sure which encounter feels stranger: the kiss in the library last night, or the unexpected predawn walk/run, where we almost connected for like a half-second before he reverted to butt-hole mode.

Returning to my bedroom, I check my email, ignoring everything except the message from Harry Langdon. I hit reply and proceeded to vomit out a bunch of lies about how 'Paul and I are going to do just fine together!'

It is not like I can tell him the truth: that I am not at all sure how to survive three months with his gorgeous, tormented son.

And then, because I have no idea what else I am supposed to be doing, I take myself on a little tour of the Langdon estates.

The compound is just as enormous and impressive in the morning as it was at twilight, and although everything is state-of-the-art, right down to the sound system in the small house, which Mick insists on showing me, I cannot help but feel like I have stepped back into another era where some desolate duke reigns over a semi-abandoned estate.

The gym is depressing. It has enough equipment for an entire football team, which is a little pathetic considering only one person is using it, and according to Harry Langdon's earlier emails, Paul only works his upper body- not the leg that so desperately needs rehabilitation.

Yet- I was not lying this morning when I pointed out that he does not seem to need his cane. Admittedly, my psychology expertise is limited to one throwaway psych class during my freshman year at NYU, but I had bet serious money that Paul Langdon's issues are a lot more in his head than in his leg.

And I suspect that, deep down, he knows it too.

Which is why he is avoiding me.

He is not trying to run me off with the same hostile enthusiasm he displayed yesterday, but he is certainly not seeking me out. I am disappointed but not surprised. He's made it noticeably clear that he cannot stand anything about me. Not my personality, not my running technique, not my pink shoes- Later, Lindy asks me to take Paul lunch- homemade minestrone and a ham sandwich- but when I bring it into the study, the room is still empty. However, there is a glass of some brown alcohol on the desk that I know was not there earlier, so he is not locked in his bedroom anymore.

Yes. Avoiding me. I take the tumbler of liquor out with me after setting the tray on the desk. I am not a teetotaler by any means, but the last thing this guy needs is to be drinking before noon.

When I get back to the kitchen, I dump the alcohol down the sink, perversely hoping that I have just tossed something extremely expensive.

I spent the next couple of hours in my room. I called my mom and gave her a glossy, half-truth-filled version of my first day. Next- I call Bella, and although I fill her in on the fact that Paul is younger than expected and ridiculously sexy (best friend privilege; I cannot tell her,) I stop short of confiding that I am both drawn to him and utterly terrified by him. I certainly do not tell her about the kiss.

But something else has been bothering me since last night.

In those first moments, after I pulled back, deliberately degrading her, she was shocked and angry, as she was supposed

to be. But in the moments that followed, there was something else that pissed me off: resignation. In a matter of seconds, the angry, betrayed light went out of her eyes, and she just stood there, accepting what I had just done as though it were her due.

I may not know Olivia Middleton well- okay; I do not know her at all, but I do know that she deserves more than what she got from me last night.

There is a soft knock at the door, and I hate that my head shoots up in expectation and my heart seems to beat just a little bit faster.

Then I remember: Olivia does not knock. It is Lindy.

‘You look tired,’ Lindy murmurs as she sets the tray with my lunch on my desk.

‘Yeah.’ I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes. ‘Rough Night.’

She nods.

‘Same with Olivia. She was up early, but I sent her right back to bed. The girl looked like she had not slept a wink.’

I catch myself before I can beg for more detail. Did she tell Lindy what happened? I scan the housekeeper’s familiar features carefully, looking for any clue, but Lindy’s calm and expressionless, as always. I like that about her. She is one of the few people who have figured out how to be there for me without acting like a goddamned battering ram. Are you listening, Dad? And all your doctor and shrinks with your bullsh*t about how PTSD can be cured?

But just for the briefest second, I wish she would ask. I wish someone would ask what happened. How I am. Something other than the vapid Need anything?

Hello, yes, I need something. I need someone to care for.

Interval: 7

Dusking Lust

Chapter: 27

Part: 1

'You're not drinking today,' Lindy says, eying my coffee mug.

I raise my eyebrows as if to say, and?

-And-

She shrugs in response. 'I asked your father for a weekend off. It will not be for a couple of weeks yet, but I am giving you a heads-up now.'

'Fine,' I muttered, relieved that she dropped the topic of my drinking. I have been telling myself all morning I am laying off the whiskey because of my headache. Not because a certain green-eyed girl has made me all too aware that I might be using alcohol for all the wrong reasons.

'Mick is taking some time off too,' Lindy says, heading toward the door. 'We are headed to Pittsburgh for a little getaway. Your father offered to get us a hotel. Though we would go to the movies. Have someone cook for me for a change.'

Wait, what? My father is giving his employees free vacations now? And the two of them are taking it together? I try to think back to the times I saw Mick and Lindy together. Not often, but then I make a point of ignoring everyone as often as

possible. Are they - you know? Good for them if they are. At least someone should be getting some.

‘Cool,’ I say.

Lindy purses her lips. ‘You will be fine. For food. I mean, it will not be my cooking, but...’

Technically she is talking to me, but I know from her tone she is trying to reassure herself that she is not abandoning me.

I give her a look. ‘Do you have any idea what they feed soldiers in Afghanistan? I will be fine.’

‘Olivia tells us she’s handy enough around the kitchen,’ Lindy responds, as though she did not hear me. ‘I’m sure you can survive on scrambled eggs or grilled cheese, or whatever she has in her repertoire.’

Olivia.

Me and Olivia.

Alone. In the house.

Olivia in itty-bitty pajamas, with full breasts and long, toned legs.

Olivia with her don’t-freak-with-me green eyes and lips that taste better than the most expensive Scotch on the market.

I will not survive it.

‘Whatever,’ I mutter.

I keep one eye on the door as I eat, half expecting Olivia to come barging in with that Andrew Jackson book she is about two pages into, insisting that we share a meal. But the door stays shut. The house stays quiet.

After lunch, I try to read, but I cannot concentrate. Instead, I head to the gym. Usually, I hit the gym first thing in the morning, after I walked along the water and before my shower, but I did not have the energy this morning. Not after last night.

The gym is, admittedly, ridiculous. It is huge by normal standards, but considering that only one person uses it, it is downright absurd. Mick and Lindy are welcome to use it, but they are not exactly fitness buffs. It is just me.

I move steadily through my routine, relishing the familiar burn as I push my upper body to the limit. The truth is, from the waist up, I am in better shape than I was at the peak of my military training, and that is saying something. On some level, I know that it has to do with overcompensating for the bad leg, but I do not give a sh*t.

For some reason, I cannot stop thinking about my leg today, all too aware that it is only going to get weaker and weaker. I keep it in usable shape by taking my daily walks. I am not a complete idiot. I might not buy any of that physical therapy bullsh*t, but I know that unused limbs atrophy and all that. But I draw the line at any lower-body exercises in here, even for my good leg. It is too much of a reminder of where I used to be, and where I will never be again. No squats. No lifts. No leg presses -

I push the thought aside, and with the last grunt, I finish my set of presses. I lie on my back on the bench, chest heaving.

‘You’re going to wind up hideously out of proportion if you keep that up.’

The voice is unexpected, and I sit up so quickly that I almost hit my head on the bar.

Olivia.

She is wearing a sports bra and matching athletic shorts in - wait for it - pink. There is an iPod in her hand and a water bottle under her arm. She is here to use the gym herself, not to hound me. Probably could have figured that out from the way she looks. The boobs might be God-given, but the rest of her has been well earned.

She moves toward me, and although her ponytail is as perky as ever, she has shadows under her eyes and her expression is more guarded than it was yesterday.

She has put walls between us, keeping me at a distance.

I feel a flash of regret, even as I mentally congratulate her. And myself.

Mission accomplished, asshole.

‘You’re going to be disproportionate,’ she repeats. ‘All bulky and ridiculous on top, and scrawny on the bottom.’

‘I’m not scrawny,’ I say immediately. Why are we talking about this instead of last night?

She comes closer, reaching out her hand and plucking at the fabric of my pants. She raises an eyebrow. ‘Yeah? When was the last time you wore shorts?’

I lift my eyebrows right back. ‘You saw me in boxers last night. Did you see scrawny?’

She snatches her hand back. ‘We’re not talking about last night.’

‘I thought you would be back in New York by now. Or at least all up my face demanding an apology.’

Her expression never changes. 'I thought about it. But I need some distance from New York, and I know better than to expect an apology, so -' She holds out her arms as though to say, here we are, deal with it.

Her matter-of-fact reaction to last night pisses me off. She should be demanding an apology- what is wrong with her that she is not? Even more annoying - why do I want to give one?

'When was the last time you did any sort of lower-body workout?' she asks, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

I snatch her water bottle and take a long drink as I study with her. 'Not your business.'

She pretends to think about this. 'Oh, wait for a second, it is my business. If you want, I can get you my job description. It specifically says-'

'I'm sure it does,' I interrupt. 'But you can go ahead and scratch that physical portion off because I'm not doing it.'

'Ten leg lifts,' she says calmly, ignoring me.

'What?' I ask, annoyed, as I get into a standing position. 'No way.'

'We can start them easily. No weight at all.'

'I'm going back to the house,' I mutter, leaning down to grab my towel.

She moves in front of me. 'Five. Leg lifts.'

I roll my eyes. 'You are a terrible negotiator. You lower your price too quickly even before you have offered an enticing reward.'

'I am not haggling with you for the thrill of it. I am just trying to do my job.' She puts her hands on her hips. It reminds me that my hands were in that very spot not so long ago. And that I want them to be there again.

I tear my eyes away from the enticing points of her hip bone.

'Why is this your job?' I ask.

She jerks her shoulders back a little, defensively. Interesting. 'What?'

'Why is coaxing me to work my sh*t leg your job of choice? My little recon exercise says you were a marketing major. Didn't Daddy want you in the lucrative family business?'

Her eyes flit away from mine. 'Sure. That was the original plan.'

'What changed?' I asked, surprised to realize that I am genuinely interested.

'Life,' she snaps. 'And we're not talking about me.'

'Obviously, we are,' I countered, taking another gulp of her water.

She opens her mouth, to tell me to f*ck off, but then she seems to reconsider. She tilts her head, and just then I realize exactly what I have set myself up for.

'I'll trade you one question for ten leg lifts.'

'Nope,' I reply, already turning around. 'No way.'

'Come on,' she says, scooting around to get in front of me. 'Don't you want to know why a hot twenty-two-year-old with everything going for her is hiding out here in Maine?'

I give her a glance over my shoulder. 'Did you just call yourself hot?'

Olivia smiles a gotcha smile. 'Aren't I?'

I flick my eyes over her. Yes. 'Maybe.'

'So, you are in? Ten leg lifts for one question?'

I hesitate, even though my brain is demanding I walk away now. 'Will I get the real story?' I ask. 'Or some bullsh*t evasion?'

'I will give you a true statement, but no guarantees that it is the whole story. Final offer.'

'Not good enough.'

She sighs. 'How about I'll give you a true statement, and I'll let you give me running pointers tomorrow?'

I put a hand on my chest. 'I cannot believe this is happening. All my dreams are coming true.'

'You in or out, Langdon?'

Walk away. Walk the hell away.

Her green eyes are practically bursting with a challenge. And, even more intriguing, secrets.

'Freak it. I am in.'

Olivia-

Yes, okay. So, agreeing to answer Paul Langdon's questions is not going to go into my Good Choices Hall of Fame. But to be fair, I have been short on good choices lately, so this feels about par for the course.

However, that does not make it any easier to think about the possibility of spilling my guts, even though I fully intend to censor the heck out of whatever truth I must give him.

For a second, I am about to back out and tell him there is no way I am going to spill my guts just to bribe him to do something he should have started a long time ago.

But then I see the tension on his face when he looks at the waiting leg-press machine. He is nervous. I mean, he is pissed too, because I am guessing I am not the only one who is furious about getting back into a corner.

But it is not Paul's anger that has me swallowing my pride and pushing on with our agreement, even at the expense of my privacy. It is his unease.

He is afraid of failing.

As he starts to head toward the leg-press machine like it is the guillotine, I mentally throw away the bubblegum pep talk that I figure is written in the Caretaker 101 textbook for this type of situation. We are supposed to be our client's cheerleaders, but this guy needs something entirely different. Acting entirely on instinct, my hand reaches out and gives him a sharp smack on the ass.

He halts, throwing me an incredulous look over his shoulder. His very nice, very sculpted shoulder.

'What was that?' He snaps.

I shrug as though touching his firm and, um, perfect ass cheek is no big deal.

'Thought you needed a little encouragement.'

He lifts his eyebrows. 'Oh, I could use some encouragement.'

Why don't I show you what sort of encouragement would rev my engines?' His eyes drop to my chest, and my nipples tighten in response.

Well - crap. That backfired.

I shoo- him forward. 'Chop- chop, Langdon. I do not have all day. Women need to exercise too.'

He gives me an understanding nod. 'Kegels. I get it.'

I make a face and jab a finger at the bench. 'Sit.'

There is no fear on his face anymore. It is perfectly blank, as though he is preparing himself for failure.

'Okay,' I say, moving over to the machine, grateful that my mom- had me going to a personal trainer since I was sixteen. Sort of psycho, now that I think about it, but at least I know my way around weight machines.

His right leg immediately falls into place, but he hesitates before moving his left leg into position. He is wearing blue sweatpants, so I cannot see his injured leg, and although I hate to admit it, I am glad.

Granted, I could have looked at it- last night when I barged in on him in his boxers, but I had more important things to worry about. Like the fact that the guy had some seriously messed-up dreams. And that he knew his way all too well around my body in way too short a time.

'Olivia -'

'Don't apologize,' she says quietly. 'I should not have tried. I am sorry.'

She reaches down to pick up the purse that she dropped and scoops her keys off the counter. 'Mick said I could

borrow one of the cars. I will not be late, but I have my cell if you need anything.' She heads toward the door.

'Wait,' I say, moving toward her.

Olivia pauses, giving me a look over her shoulder.
'What?'

'I -I...'

I have no freaking idea what I am trying to say. I do not know if I want to tell her to stay or have fun, or something even more godawful and unimaginable, like begging her to take me with her.

Take me with you on a Friday night where there are people and beers and laughter and sh*tty music, and my old friend Kali.

But I say none of those things, especially not the last one.

I do not go out. Not anymore.

'Thanks for making me dinner,' I say gruffly.

This time she does not even turn around. 'Just doing my job, Langdon.'

Olivia-

I have never been to a bar by myself.

And I cannot say I have ever imagined my first foray into solo drinking being at a tiny local bar on the outskirts of Bar Harbor, Maine. But tonight, I force myself.

Lately, I have been terrified that Paul's reclusiveness will be contagious. Like if I do not get some outside human interaction, I will turn into a hostile turd like him, and become

this wretched beast who does not have to be accountable to anyone for my pissed moods.

That is only part of the reason I left the house tonight. Truthfully? I hoped he had come with me. Not that I asked. I intentionally did not ask, being stupid enough to imagine that the thought of being left all alone might be enough to spur Paul into leaving the house of his own volition.

I planned to make it look very much like I wanted him to stay. I made what Google claimed to be the Ultimate World-Famous Chili, avoided him all day (actually, he avoided me first, but whatever,) and I dressed carefully in an outfit intended to be sexy but understated. You know, a girl going out on the town for her amusement, but if she happened to meet a cute guy, then hey, why not?

But Paul did not take the bait. I guess I should count it as progress that he even came out of his lair in search of food, but the truth is, I am disappointed. It is just not right for a twentysomething guy to be cooped up in the house for years. How long until all that isolation turns him into one of those weird hermits who cannot function in normal society even if he wanted to?

I am parked outside of Frenchy's. I want to turn right back around and go home, but Lindy's lecture from earlier that afternoon is still rattling around in my brain. Just because he wants to pretend, he is dead does not mean you have to. We may not be in New York City, but we have good people here. Work your thing, sister.

Okay, so the talk was half sweet, half awkward, but Lindy made a good point. I do not want to end up like Paul: socially stunted and on a one-way street toward freakdom.

I got out of the car.

From the outside, Frenchy's- I assume the name comes from its location on Frenchman Bay- looks like a combination of a ski lodge and roadside dive. The wood beams give it a homey, welcoming feeling, while the smattering of neon beer signs in the windows lends just the right amount of bar vibe. On the right side of the building is a covered deck, which I imagine is the place to be on a clear summer's day, but in late September it is deserted. However, the faint thump of music shows that inside, at least, there is some activity.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

My worst-case scenario is that the entire place falls silent as everyone turns to stare at the newcomer. The best case is nobody notices me, and I can find a bar stool, preferably at the end, where I can sit and get my bearings.

The reality is somewhere in between. The old-school rock music rocks on as I step inside, and although most of the clientele is far enough along in whiskey and beer to be oblivious to my arrival, people at the handful of tables nearest the door turn to glance at me. And then glance a second time.

Lindy assured me that this was a local hangout, a place where I had fit right in, but I think she may have been forgetting the not-so-tiny detail that I am not exactly a local. I do not fit right in. Not even a tiny bit.

Even if my clothes do not scream city girl (which they do,) I stand out just by being a girl at all. I count five women, sure, but most of the clientele is men. Fishermen, judging from the attire.

Still, it is not the painful scene I was fearing. It is uncomfortable, sure, but most of the looks are curious, not lecherous or leering. I give a tentative smile to a middle-aged couple, and the woman gives me a half-smile back as her

companion turns back to his phone and beer, totally disinterested.

Although there are plenty of available tables, sitting alone at a table somehow seems a little too lonely considering I am after human companionship, so I make my way to a cluster of empty bar stools.

Almost immediately a glass of water is in front of me, followed by a white paper coaster with Frenchy's scribbled across the middle in a no-nonsense font.

'What can I get yah?' asks a friendly voice.

The bartender is a cute brunette with freckles and warm honey-brown eyes.

Her hair pulled up in one of those messy buns that some girls make look adorable. She is one of those girls.

'Um, white wine?' I ask, hoping it is not a terrible faux pas in a place like this.

'I have chardonnay or pinot grigio. The chard's way better.'

'I'll have that, then,' I say, returning her friendly smile.

She plunks a glass in front of me before heading to the fridge and pulling out the wine bottle.

'Not a lot of wine drinkers?' I ask, noticing that the bottle is unopened.

She shrugs. 'Beer's the drink of choice, but more people are getting wine now that I got rid of the sugar swill they used to serve here.'

'Oh, wow,' I say as she fills my glass way beyond the typical pour.

‘You look like you need it,’ she says with a wink before sliding back down the bar to check on the other patrons.

She is right on two fronts- the chardonnay is delicious, and I do need it.

I watch the bartender out of the corner of my eye. She chats up an old guy at the end of the bar, she laughs long and genuinely as he tells her some story about his grandson’s antics.

Lindy did not describe the mysterious Kali to me beyond saying that she is a ‘good sort,’ but the age is about right, and I wonder if this is Paul’s childhood summer friend.

When she makes her way toward me again to refill my water, I get up the nerve to ask.

‘Yeah, I’m Kali,’ she says, looking a little surprised by the question. ‘Have we met?’

‘Nope, I’m new to the area.’

‘Yeah, I guessed that by the silk shirt,’ she says in a confidential whisper.

‘I am betting it costs more than a car payment for most of us here. Tourist?’

‘Sort of,’ I hedged. ‘I’m working over at the Langdon house.’

Her smile slips. ‘Paul’s place?’

‘Yeah.’

She stands up straighter, her palms flat against the bar as she studies me, almost protective. ‘You don’t look like Langdon employee material.’

Her tone is kind, but it is clear I am being evaluated.
'What do I look like?'

She shrugs. 'A few years ago- I would have pegged you as girlfriend material for Paul. But now...?'

We make eye contact and have one of those weird moments of female understanding. We both know he does not have girlfriends anymore. 'I'm the new caregiver,' I say quietly. 'Although that word never quite feels right.'

'Yeah, Paul has never really been one to be taken care of. At least, not as I remember him.'

I lean forward a little, desperate to keep her talking, but not wanting to come off as prying. 'You haven't seen him since he came back?'

She shakes her head and needlessly tops off my wine glass- a good sign that she is not trying to get rid of me. 'Nah. My folks' place is not too far from his house. The Langdon used to rent that place where they live, you know. Paul's father only bought it a couple of years ago when he needed a full-time, um, retreat for Paul. I live closer to town now, but back when we were kids, I lived for the day when Paul would show up for those couple of weeks in the summer.'

I quickly stamp down the surge of jealousy. They were just kids, for God's sake. Friends. At least they were just friends. And not that it is any of my business if they were more.

'He knows you're here tonight?' she asks, her tone casual. Too casual. I know what she is asking: Why hasn't he come to see me?

'He, um - he's not so much the social type,' I say.

‘Yeah,’ she mutters. ‘I gathered that after getting turned away at the door every day for a month after he moved in.’

My heart twists a little at the sadness in her voice.

What, Paul? It is clear to me now that he is friendless and alone because he wants to be. Not because everybody shunned him.

‘How’s he doing?’ she asks. ‘I mean, we all hear things, but you know small towns and their rumors. It is hard to pull out the facts.’

‘He’s probably about like you’ve heard,’ I say, maintaining eye contact.

‘Rude, angry, and generally unpleasant.’

‘Well now,’ a deep voice says from behind me. ‘There’s something to make a guy’s heart skip a beat.’

I freeze at the familiar voice. Too late I realize that the place has grown mostly quiet, save for the music. I turn around and realize that the awkward staring I have been expecting has finally commenced.

Only they are not staring at me.

They are staring at Paul.

His eyes hold mine for several seconds, his thumb doing that slow stroking over the head of his cane before his eyes move over my shoulder and lock on the girl behind the bar. ‘Hey, Kali.’

Please do not reject him, I silently beg of her. Please understand how big a moment this is for him.

I do not know if she hears my unspoken plea or if she is just a good sort of person because she does not throw a beer in

his face or make any kind of snotty remark. Instead, she launches herself across the bar and winds her arms around his neck. It is a hug. The stunning look of pleasure on his face almost breaks my heart.

When Kali releases him, Paul gives an almost shy smile and starts to sit on the stool to my right, but then inexplicably moves around to sit on the other side of me.

The pressure in my chest tightens as I realize what he has just done. He is intentionally sat with the scarred side of his face toward me, his good side facing everyone else.

He trusts me.

The realization makes me ridiculously warm.

‘What can I get you?’ Kali asks. ‘Last time we drank together; it was sneaking citrus vodka out of your dad’s liquor cabinet.’

Paul laughs. ‘I have graduated. How about whiskey and Coke?’

Kali plops the drink down in front of him before reluctantly moving back down the bar to attend to a gesturing patron.

Several people are still looking our way and whispering, but Paul seems determined to ignore them, and I follow suit.

‘So, my chili was that bad?’ I ask, taking a sip of my wine.

He stabs his ice with the stir stick. ‘I had some. It was not awful.’

‘It was amazing, and you know it. Take back what you said about me not being able to cook.’

The corner of his mouth turns up slightly. 'I found a sandwich in the fridge. I am guessing you made it for lunch and then took it away because I was hiding like a little b*tch?'

I tap my nose. Bingo.

He smirks. 'Well, I had a bite of the sandwich. Completely pedestrian.'

'It was turkey and cheddar on wheat. What were you expecting for lunch, some sort of asiago soufflé and escarole salad?'

Paul snorts. 'Your New York is showing.'

He has a point. I have long been part of the high-priced wine bar and frou-frou café set. Asiago soufflés used to be part of an average Wednesday. Even though

I have been holed up here in Maine for a few weeks, those days feel like they were forever ago. It somehow feels exactly right to be perched on this worn leather stool at a wooden bar that looks older than I am, sitting next to a guy who is a one-part beautiful mystery and one-part unpredictable beast.

'You can relax,' I say quietly. 'Everyone's gone back to their business.'

'Only because they cannot see the scars from this angle. If they could, they would be heading toward the door or vomiting up their onion rings.'

'I see them, and I'm not running toward the door.'

His eyes flick to mine then, and for a second there is this moment between us.

She comes back and the moment's gone. I do not resent her. Not really. She represents a normal side of Paul that I have not been able to access- his pre- Afghanistan self. And her response to his new appearance could not have been more perfect.

It is official: I do not get women.

Olivia should be pissed at me. Just a few hours ago, I would have sworn that she was. But now she is changing it up, and I do not like it at all. I do not trust forgiveness I did not earn.

The weird thing is, I never used to be so clueless with girls. I will not pretend that I am a mind reader or anything, but of course, I know that fine never means fine, and if you ask a girl if you can skip a date to go to a Red Sox game with your friends, she will say, 'Go ahead,' which means you are a dead man.

I have had a few girlfriends. Only one was serious. Serious enough that we did the long-distance thing when I went to Afghanistan. When I got back, a well-meaning nurse told me that Ashley had come by to see me, once.

Honestly, I do not blame her for not sticking around after she saw my mangled face. My scars are ugly now, but early on when the wounds were fresh, I was downright grotesque.

My dad mentioned that Ashley got married to the son of one of his vice presidents and had twins. I do not know if he meant it to be a wake-up call or what, but the truth is I did not feel much of anything when he told me.

The point is, I used to know girls. But this thing with Olivia is a whole other ball game.

Sometime in the past hour, she has gone from acting like I am a ticking bomb to being, well, friendly. This is not to say that she has been unfriendly. In a couple of weeks since I called

her a useless hooker and then threw her ex-boyfriend in her face, leaving her to cry alone at night (is there a gold medal for assholes? I have earned it,) Olivia has not done the prissy silent treatment thing, and I give her props for that.

But even though she has been perfectly civil, things have been different.

The conversation is shallower. She never touches me anymore, not even accidentally.

Often, she avoids prolonged eye contact, and she is taken to 'reading alone' in the afternoons so she can concentrate.

I should be thrilled. I accomplished my goal of distance quite easily. It is supposed to feel like a reward. Instead, it feels an awful lot like punishment.

I miss her...

But that is not to say that there are no alarm bells going off in my head right now. Because without warning, the old Olivia is back. And I am too relieved for comfort.

Her long, slim fingers appear in front of my face, and she snaps rapidly three times. 'Yo... Langdon. A toddler can do more squats than you. Focus.'

See what I mean? Old Olivia... The sassy version who does not treat me like an invalid. We are in the gym, and she is doing her tough-love physical trainer thing, which is both annoying and cute as hell.

Her hair is pulled into a high, perky fountain, reminding me a little of a cheerleader, and she is wearing purple instead of the usual pink. Except for the shoes. The shoes are still pink. She insists on wearing the old pink ones on days when she does not

run because she has a limit on how many days per week, she is willing to look like, and I quote, 'a freaking hobo.'

What she is wearing does not matter, though. Because she has me right where she wants me.

I am doing squats.

With weight. Not much weight, and nothing even close to what I was managing before the ambush. But the steady, repetitive bend-and-straighten motion is not something I imagined doing ever again in any capacity. My leg does not even hurt. Much.

I refocus my efforts, and with Olivia looking on, I finish the last set of reps.

She grins, making it all worth it. 'How'd it feels...?'

'Sh*tty,' I say, doing my best to resist her good mood.

She takes a step closer. I step back, but I am pinned in by the weight machine. The little minx has me cornered. She scoots up nicely and close. In other words, torment.

'Liar,' she says. 'It feels good, and you know it.'

Christ. Is she talking about the exercise or her nearness? Because one felt great, but the other is bittersweet agony.

Her eyes flick to my lips just briefly before she takes a step back.

My eyes narrow. She is up to something.

'I don't suppose- I could talk you into doing my yoga routine with me?' she asks, rolling her shoulders as though to loosen them.

‘Hell, no,’ I mutter. ‘I have nothing against yoga. It is just that watching you do yoga is a good deal more interesting than participating.’

Her eyes go dark, and I smile with satisfaction. Two can play this game.

But by the time she unrolls her yoga mat- pink- and starts with the now-familiar poses, she is winning. Watching Olivia do yoga is, in fact, interesting, but it is also tormenting. Is it just my imagination, or is she holding that downward-facing dog position just a second longer than necessary? And I am pretty sure I do not remember that position where she arches her back quite like that from previous days.

Those damned tight yoga pants girls like to wear are tempting enough when they are not doing yoga. But when her butt’s in the air all tight and cute?

Sh*t. By the time she contorts herself into something that is her grabbing her ankles, I am f*cking sweating.

Is there a yoga position that involves her beneath me, hands pinned above her head, clothing-optional? Because then I might rethink her yoga offer. By the time she is finished, I am hard, even though I have been pretending to be adjusting the weights on one of the machines. She carefully ignores me. I ignore her right back as I move to refill my water bottle.

She tucks her yoga mat under her arm, and we move toward the door together.

So, she says, her voice is easy and sweet. Too sweet. I instantly go on guard as I hold the gym door open for her. Here it comes. Whatever she has been working up to is finally becoming known.

‘Any nightmares lately?’ She asks.

I tense even further. 'Nope.'

That is a lie, and I can tell immediately that she knows it. Her lips flatten a little in disappointment that I do not confide further, but what does she expect? That she just must wiggle her butt around and badger me into exercising and I will suddenly go all 'Dear Diary' on her?

She recovered quickly. 'Okay. Next question. Why would you say that thing about Ethan when your dad was here?'

I almost choke on my water. Talk about a subject change.

'I'm an ass,' I say, glancing briefly at her profile.

'Finally, a true statement,' she says as we get closer to the house.

She is waiting for an apology, but I am not really in the mood.

Olivia does not ask anything more, but I am still tense, certain that I am missing something. Two unrelated questions delivered back-to-back, but with no push for a truthful answer? It is all very un-female- very un- Olivia. What is she up to this time?

Once inside the main house, she immediately starts up the stairs. Still lost in thought, I start to follow her up, my eyes still checking out her ass, because, you know, yoga pants. That and more than two years of celibacy. My dad knew exactly what he was doing, sending a twentysomething in here for my 'recovery.'

Olivia turns around abruptly, and I am caught staring, but I do not care.

She is a step-in front of me, so I am looking up at her, and I lift my eyebrows in question, bracing.

Here it comes. Her trump cards.

‘Hey, I just realized something,’ she says.

I roll my eyes. Sure, you did. ‘Okay?’

Her eyes sparkle in triumph. ‘Your cane. You left it in the gym.’

Her casual observation has me taking a full step backward on the stairs.

She is right... What... The... Hell.

I stood there long after she skipped up the steps. I am unable to move. Almost unable to breathe.

She is right. I walked the entire way, not only without my cane but without even realizing I did not have my cane.

The thought should elate me, but I cannot shake the dark sense of foreboding. No matter where I look, my walls are crumbling, and this damned girl keeps presenting me with the most dangerous element of all.

Hope...

Olivia...

On some level, I guess I must be bracing for his nightmares. My bedroom is on the same floor as Paul’s but not exactly next door, so I am not sure I would hear his shouts through two closed doors if I were not listening to them.

But I am listening to them.

I have heard from them the past couple of nights too, but things have been so weird between us that I knew my presence was the last thing that would be of comfort to him.

Tonight, however, instinct leads me in a different direction. It leads me straight to Paul.

My feet are on the floor the second I hear his first cry. Knowing that he sleeps almost naked, this time I grab my robe and pull it over my boxers and tank top, knotting the belt as I move down the hall.

I hesitate outside his door, torn between wanting to allow him privacy and give him comfort. God knows that the last time I went barging in there in the middle of the night, it did not exactly end well for my pride.

I hear a low moan.

Then 'Alex. Alex, no...'

Screw it.

He needs me.

The sheets are down around his waist, and there is just enough light to make out that he is shirtless.

Oh boy.

I take a deep breath and move toward the bed. One arm is flung up over his head, the other fisted at his side as his fingers flex against the bedding.

Moving slowly, I reach for his hand, taking it in mine as I sit beside the bed. I feel a little silly. The whole thing is very Florence Nightingale, but the need to comfort is almost overwhelming.

He makes another moaning noise.

Do I wake him? I did that last time, and he flipped his sh*t. But letting him stay in whatever hell his sleeping mind's taken him seems cruel.

'Paul.'

He twitches.

'Paul.' Louder this time.

He stills, but his body's still rigid.

Gently I put a hand on his shoulder, trying to shut out the shock waves that go through me at the contact of skin on skin. It is just a shoulder, Olivia.

'Wake up,' I say softly.

He has stopped crying out, but his breathing is harsh and ragged.

'Paul!' I shake him now.

His eyes fly open, and he lies perfectly still.

I stay still too, letting him get his bearings. I wait for the tension to ease and his breathing to become more regular, but it is almost as though the air becomes electric as he realizes my presence.

His eyes meet mine, and the mood goes from tense to intoxicating.

'This better still be part of my dream,' he says, his voice raspy.

I shake my head, afraid that if I talk, I will break the moment. That he will go crazy like he did last time, drinking alcohol like it is going out of style and doling out bruising kisses like their punishments.

If he kisses me tonight, I do not want it to be about pushing me away. I want it to be about bringing me closer.

I do not know who moves first. One second, I am trying so hard not to look at his mouth, working up the courage to ask him about his dream, and the next second, I am beneath him.

I should be shocked, but I am not. I knew as soon as I left the safety of my bedroom that I would somehow end up here, on Paul Langdon's rumpled bed with him braced above me.

With his weight on his left arm, he uses his right hand to trace a line from my temple down around my ear. His finger continues its slow downward movement, skimming across my collarbone. He pauses when he reaches the edge of my robe.

'You shouldn't have come,' he whispers, his eyes following the slow-motion of his finger.

I swallow... 'I heard from you. You sounded -' Like you need me.

He shakes his head once, as though to tell both of us that he does not need anyone, but we both know better.

I lie there, silent, wondering whether I dare to ask outright. Ever since that conversation with Lindy about how nobody had ever asked him point-blank about what happened overseas, I have known that the time will come when I must be the one to ask. He needs to talk about it; he has just never been given the chance. Not really.

But I must move slowly. It has been buried inside him for so long that prying will only result in him pushing me away. Just like he has with his father and anyone else who has ever cared about him.

Maybe now is not the time.

Because tonight - tonight he does not look like he wants to talk. And when he is staring at me with hot, burning eyes, I do not want to talk either.

Blue eyes ask the words that he will not voice aloud. Do you want me?

My answer is also wordless.

But I make sure I am very, very clear about what I want.

I slip my hand around the back of his neck, relishing the crispness of his ruthlessly short haircut against my palm.

I tugged his face downward. He is already in motion.

There is no teasing this time as his lips quickly nudge mine open, his tongue sliding in to claim mine. I let out a tiny moan, wrapping both arms around his neck as he rolls more firmly on top of me, pressing me against the softness of the mattress.

Our mouths move frantically, restlessly, as we struggle to get closer. One or both of us kick the tangled sheet out of the way, and we both groan as his hips settle between my thighs.

My stomach drops even before I see the regretful twist of my father's mouth. This is like one of those wretched movie scenes that come to life. You know, the one where the d*ick-head guy says something cruel about the girl who is standing behind him? It is on the tip of my tongue to say that I do not need anyone to take care of me. But I want Olivia to tell him that. I want her to tell him that she is here with me because she wants to be, not because he is paying her. I want her to tell him the truth about breakfast, and last night.

I put on a quick swipe of mascara and pink lip gloss. I try to tell myself that it is out of habit (my mom believes that ladies should always be groomed,) but I am fairly sure it is because I am trying to make up for the fact that the last time Paul saw me, I had major boob sweat and a greasy ponytail and was short on oxygen.

My dark jeans and cream sweater are not exactly sexy, but they are a significant improvement from my running gear. As is the fact that I am showered.

You are an employee; my brain reminds me. So not the time to cultivate your inner tramp.

At the library door, I start to knock, only to realize that will give him a chance to throw himself out the window or sneak out some secret passageway that I am only half kidding about. Instead, I go right in, and the scene in front of me is- um- a well, it is ridiculously appealing.

The roaring fireplace in the corner, the sexy guy in the big wingback chair by the fireplace with a book, and another of those amber-liquid-filled tumblers. It is all very après-ski chic.

For the first time since arriving in this hellish place, I feel a true pang of regret for intruding on him. He does not seem like a victim who needs a keeper so much as a guy trying to read a book in peace by the fire on a blustery afternoon.

I am thinking about backing away and leaving him to the quiet when he opens his fat mouth.

‘That liquor you tossed earlier came from a five-hundred-dollar bottle.’

Ah... Back to normal... I use my foot to close the door behind me. ‘I am sure that made a dent in the family coffers. You know, right, that all the artwork in your halls is original?’

‘Come on,’ he says, still not looking up from his book
‘You are a rich girl.

Surely you know how stereotypical comments like that
can be.’

‘Yeah, you look torn up about it,’ I mutter, moving
closer to him. ‘And how do you know I’m rich?’

‘Google. Your family’s a big deal.’

I ignore this. We will both be better off not talking
about me.

‘So, what is it?’ I ask, tentatively sitting in the chair
across from his even though I am uninvited and unwelcome. I
study him. Paul has just a bit more stubble than he did
yesterday. Normally I prefer a clean-cut guy, but this slightly
rough look suits his golden-boy-meets-jaded-war-hero vibe. I
wait for him to look at me, mentally bracing myself for the
shock of it.

As though he sensed my thoughts, his gray eyes flicked
to mine, and I am not sure why I thought bracing for it would
make a damned bit of difference. It still sends ripples of want
from my eyelashes right down to my toes.

‘What is what?’ He asks.

It took me a moment to realize that I asked him a
question. ‘The precious liquor I threw out. What is it?’

His eyes flicker in irritation and I think he is going to tell
me to get the hell out, but something stops him, and he very
slowly lifts the crystal glass from the table and hands it to me.

I sniff... ‘Scotch...’

He nods. 'A thirty-year-old Highland Park. Not the best we have, but not something to be tossed down the drain, either.'

'Very alpha.'

He rolls his eyes, and I take a tiny sip, knowing from experience that I do not like Scotch. Turns out I do not like the \$500 one either, or I handed it back to him with a little shrug.

'Want anything?' He asks. 'Wine?'

'I'm good.'

Water would be great right now. Between the hot look in his eyes and the heat of the fire, I am a bit, um, parched.

'What are you reading?' I ask.

He groans. 'Not this again. I know we are stuck with each other, but do we have to do the get-to-know-each-other chat? Can't we just sit in silence?'

The way he talks with each other gives me pause. I know why I am sticking this out, but why is he? From what I have heard from Lindy and what I inferred from his father; Paul has no qualms about driving people away.

Is he treating me differently? Or just biding his time until he figures out how to add me to his list of banished caretakers?

I want it to be the first one.

'Fine,' I say, sitting back in the chair and settling in. 'I'll give you twenty minutes of silence in exchange for a shared dinner.'

'Hell no,' he says calmly, his attention already returned to his book as he turns a page.

‘Thirty minutes of silence.’

‘I don’t share meals with anyone.’

‘Come on,’ I cajole. ‘I promise not to try to feed you your soup airplane-style like a child.’

‘No.’

‘Paul.’

His eyes flick up again, and for the briefest of moments, the look on his face is almost one of longing. I realize it is the first time I have spoken his name aloud.

I am fairly sure I am not just another caretaker. The thing is, I do not know what I am.

‘I can keep a one-sided conversation going for a long time,’ I press on, quickly trying to move us away from the charged moment. ‘Let us see, I was born on August thirtieth, which means that my birthstone is peridot, which is a fancy word for ugly green. And speaking of color, this hair color? So not natural. I mean, I was one of those adorable blond toddlers, but it all went mouse-brown right about the time I started third grade, and I have been adjusting to it ever since. I got my first period when I was... um- 10.’

~*~

What Karly said- ‘I first made cummie when I was 13. - About the time I fell in love with boys and me...’

~*~

‘Okay!’ he interrupts. ‘I cave. You give me an hour and a half of silence now, and I will eat dinner with you later, but we cannot talk during that either.’

‘No deal. I will give you one hour of quiet time now, but we will talk at dinner.’

He takes a small sip of Scotch and studies me. ‘You’re annoying.’

I start to argue that annoyance has never been one of my personality traits. I have always been more in the polite, mellow, and shy category. I always say the right thing at parties, I respect other people’s boundaries, and I dodge controversial topics like their landmines. But there is something about him that is brought out this other version of myself. I like it.

I shrug, refusing to apologize. Besides, the old, sweet Olivia would get stomped on by this guy.

‘So, do you know who Andrew Jackson is?’ I ask, pulling my legs beneath me and curling into the soft black leather of the chair.

‘Yes, I know who Andrew Jackson is. Old Hickory.’

Old what? ‘Whatever,’ I say. ‘Have you heard of this book? It is called American Lion,’ and- ‘Olivia,’ says mildly, turning the page of his book, ‘that hour of silence is effective immediately.’

I sigh... Guess I will have to read this book to talk about it. So disappointing.

‘Okay,’ I say as I open the foreword. ‘But you should know that I plan to eat very, very slowly at dinner.’

I ignore his groan as I settle in to read about this Old Hickory guy. And sneak a few glances at the hottest guy I have ever seen.

It is hot. So, freaking hot, but I am not even aware of it. None of us are because it is always hot, and not worth

complaining about because there are bigger things to worry about, like the helicopter that went down last week or the Humvee that did not return to base last night.

The best you can do is ignore the heat, play football with your friends when you can, and pray to any god, spirit, or deity you can think of that you will be one of the lucky ones.

Then Williams breaks the code.

We are out on standard patrol, and he breaks the damn code.

‘I freaking hate it here.’

I am in the process of mentally thinking about what I am supposed to write to Ashley, my girlfriend back home, but my brain skids to a halt at Williams’s outburst. Garcia and Miller stop bastardizing whatever outdated Jay-Z song they were attempting to sing and stare at Williams with a mixture of dismay and disgust.

Alex Skinner, my best friend since boot camp, just looks pissed. ‘Goddamn it, Williams.’

Greg Williams merely shrugs. Of all of us, he is the smallest, but he is damned fast. And smart. At least I thought so until he broke the freaking code.

‘Don’t start that,’ I say, trying to lighten the mood. ‘You know the second we start acknowledging that we are, living the sh*t life, that’s the second our luck runs out.’

‘I am just saying. This freaking- blows. The sand, the heat, the constant fear of being sent home in a box. You all know it.’

Skinner leans forward to get in Williams's face. 'We all knew that getting into it. This is not some glorified World War I bullsh*t where we did not know what to expect.'

Williams shoves at Skinner's shoulder, and I place an arm between them before the two hotheads make a sh*tty situation sh*ttier.

'I'm allowed to say what I think,' Williams grumbles, shaking both of us off and staring down at his hands. 'I am allowed to say what we are all thinking. There is not a freaking curse that is going to come because I spoke the truth.'

Less than ten minutes later, we find out he is wrong.

Williams gets sent home in a box.

So, do the rest of them.

Suddenly time both speeds up and slows down, and a second later I am on the ground holding on to Alex, and he is trying to talk but the only thing that comes out of his mouth is blood.

There is too much blood. Mine. His. It is all one bitter, metallic mess.

I try to understand what Alex is telling me. I try to understand his dying wish, try to comprehend his last word, but there is too much blood.

There is always too much damned blood.

It is not the first time I have woken up in a pool of sweat.

But it is the first time since those early days in the hospital that someone has been there when I wake up.

I do not remember the nurses well, but I am fairly sure none of them looked like Olivia Middleton, kneeling on my bed, wearing only a tiny white T-shirt and pink boxer shorts. What is it with her and pink?

And then I comprehend that she is here. In my bedroom.

I comprehend why she is here.

Part: 2

The dream.

I was yelling, and she came to find out why.

‘Get the freakout,’ I say, pushing myself into a sitting position and rolling out of bed on the other side before she can touch me. ‘Get the freak-out!’

‘You were screaming,’ she says calmly as she climbs off the bed and turns to face me, the king-size bed separating her from my sweaty, amped-up self.

‘Of course, I am yelling. It is a goddamned war.

My chin dips down and rests on my chest in defeat. I cannot turn around. I cannot make myself look at her face. But the little hurt noise makes tears at me anyway.

But that does not mean I have to like the way he keeps laughing at every other thing she says, or the way they are both dropping names of mutual friends I have never heard of. Five minutes ago, I thought Kali was about the cutest, nicest thing on the planet- Maine BFF material. Now I hate that she is the cutest, nicest thing on the planet. I also hate the way Paul smiles so easily around her.

He never smiles like that around me.

She studies me for a moment, and I am fairly sure she wants to call my bluff.

Instead, the door closes behind her, and I stand for several moments staring at bobbing sailboats, wishing I could be on one of them sailing too anywhere that is not here.

It is a testament to just how comfortable my life has been up until the past couple of months that I have truly never given much thought to being unhappy. I mean, I never really thought about being happy either. I guess you could say I have floated but in a harmless, life-is-good kind of way.

And now?

Now I cannot bear the thought of returning to my life with all its glossy easiness, and yet staying in Maine is as unfathomable. Not just because it is foreign, and not just because Paul is a complete ass-plug who may or may not turn me on. But because I do not know what I am supposed to do.

Tomorrow morning is right around the corner, and I will be expected to do the job that they are paying me for: being a companion to a guy who cannot take care of himself. Except, beyond that limp and the sneer, he is managing simply fine.

I cannot imagine he will want me to read the classics aloud to him while he dabbles in watercolors. I will be lucky if he even lets me in the same room.

The futility of it all threatens to choke me, and I go through the motions of unpacking the suitcase that Mick carried upstairs for me. With each bra I drop into the dresser, I keep hoping it will help my brain accept that I am staying.

Instead, my mind is going down a ridiculous path - wondering which bra Paul would most like to see. Wondering what it would feel like to have him take it off me. Wondering -

Oh, my God, Middleton. You are half a dirty thought away from being a revolting perv.

By the time I brush my teeth and wash my face in the small but modern bathroom, I am surprised to realize that I am exhausted even though the sun's barely set. I wonder if I am supposed to check on 'Mr. Paul,' but from the way he glared at me as I stormed out of his cave earlier, I do not think another encounter today will do either of us any good.

Changing into my pajamas, I curl up on my side on the large bed, resting my cheek on my hands as I stare out at the dark sky. When I finally drift off to sleep, it is not picturesque water and boats I see. It is an angry mouth and gorgeous blue eyes.

For the first time in months, my dreams are not about Ethan. Or Michael.

Tonight, my dreams are about someone far more dangerous to me than either of the guys from my past.

Back when I was in high school, football and I were important. And I always liked it well enough, but football was never really my true passion, cheesy as those sounds.

I was semi-disappointed when my coach marked me for QB early in my freshman year. The quarterback does not get to run much.

That is my passion. Running. Tossing a football to a bunch of other guys is nothing compared to the rush I got from running.

I ran every day leading up to Afghanistan. I ran as often as I could around the base after I got there. And since getting back - Well, let us just say that my future holds as much hope for running as it does fly.

But I have a secret.

Not a big one. It is pathetic. But one that nobody knows. Well, I suspect Mick and Lindy might, but they will not dare mention it.

The truth is running is the one area of my life where I let the tiniest ray of hope shine in. Not hope. Because I cannot let myself think that it is going to happen. But I dream of running again.

It is that dream that has me getting up at the ass crack of dawn every morning. Before Lindy or Mick or whatever godforsaken caretaker is lurking about is awake - hell before the sun's even up.

I go outside and pretend I am running. Not physically pretending, of course. My leg's not even remotely able to sustain that kind of fantasy. But mentally? I ran.

It is the only time I will use my cane. Partially because nobody's watching, but also because the cane allows me to go longer, farther, faster. Just a mile or so on a trail that winds around the bay. I walk/hobble in the predawn silence and let myself pretend just for an hour that I am running. That I am normal. It is my time. Of course, being the hermit that I am, all the time is my time. But this is different.

I would almost say- sacred if that did not sound so ridiculous. But save for the fishermen, because this is Maine, I am alone. And this solitude is different from the rest of my day because it is intentional.

This time of the day is the only time I feel alive.

And I never dreamed that it could be ripped away from me in the most debilitating way possible.

Olivia- the very person who kept me up the entire night- is a runner. Worse, she is running on my path during my time.

She is running toward me, and although she is still an effective way off, I know it is her. That blond ponytail and that tall, slim frame are all I have been able to think about since that kiss.

Turning around would be futile. Her jog would easily overtake my walk, so there is nothing to do but wait. And brace...

I slow to a standstill. It is bad enough that she must see me with the cane; I will be damned before I give her the spectacle of watching me hobble along with it.

Part: 3

She has got hot pink running shoes, which are ridiculous, especially since they perfectly match the long-sleeved pink running shirt. The hairband is also pink.

Come to think of it, wasn't she wearing a pink sweater yesterday? Just what I need. A bubblegum explosion in my life.

Even if her fashion-forward running gear did not clue me in (real runners do not care about matching their hairband to their shoes,) it is obvious from her slow pace, her pink cheeks, and the gait that is just slightly off that she is new at this.

Already my brain is racing with pointers. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Do not move your arms so much. You overpronate, do your girly shoes compensate for that?

At first, I thought she would not see me. There is no change in her gait or expression as she closes the gap between us. But then she is upon me. Then in front of me. She stops.

My fingers clench on the handle of my cane- a black python affair I ordered on the Internet mostly because it was so ridiculously gaudy- and I resist the urge to turn my head and give her my profile. My good side.

But if the two are going to be stuck together for three months, she had better get used to seeing me. I had better get used to her seeing me.

She does not look at the cane at all, and other than the briefest flick of her green eyes over my scars, she does not seem to care about those either. Then again, it is still dark, with the barest hint of the early morning sun illuminating us, so perhaps she cannot see their ugliness. Which reminds me-

‘You shouldn’t go running alone in the dark,’ I growl.

She frowns imperceptibly, just the finest line between her dark blond eyebrows. ‘Why not?’

‘You go running through the streets of New York City at the crack of dawn?’

‘How do you know I’m from New York City?’

I remain silent, not wanting to have to explain that I spent most of the night studying the limited information my dad had sent over to Olivia. Nothing interesting. NYU drop-out. Manhattan resident. Short of a crash course in CPR, no experience in taking care of anyone. She turned twenty-two just days before arriving in Maine.

‘What the hell is she wearing?’ Sarah asks cattily.

It is no secret that my friends fall into the snob category, Bella excepted most of the time. Sarah's the worst of the lot, and not for the first time in my life I wonder why I continue to let her pretend we are friends.

Knowing that they will continue to hover around me like a pack of glamorous guard dogs until I have dealt with the newcomers, I sneak a tiny peek over my shoulder at where Ethan and Stephanie stand to talk to a mutual family friend.

My heart twists the tiniest bit at the sight of Ethan. In his gray slacks, perfectly tailored white shirt, and Burberry tie, he looks as well-groomed and gorgeous as ever. He has dark blond hair and broad shoulders better suited to Hollywood than the Manhattan business world, but luckily, he has the brain and the charm to keep his head above water amid the Manhattan sharks.

Then- I look at her.

From the sneer on my friends' faces, I was expecting Stephanie to be wearing torn jeans, a leopard-print catsuit, or something else ridiculous, but the truth is she looks cute. Her dark eye makeup is the perfect complement to her wide blue eyes, and the strapless gray dress would be downright demure if not for the bright orange belt around her tiny waist. She is paired the whole thing with these beat-up-looking riding boots, which, while not exactly an Upper East Side standard, gives the whole effect of a girl comfortable with herself.

Of course, she is comfortable. She is perched on the arm of the boy you thought you were going to marry.

I push the b*tchy thought away. I have had months to accept that Ethan is not coming back. Hell, I was even the one who insisted that he and his new girlfriend be invited to the party. Ethan's parents and mine have been best friends since

long before we were even in the womb. I am not about to let a little thing like betrayal throw a wrench in that.

‘You okay, Liv?’ Bella asks softly.

I tear my eyes away from Ethan and Stephanie. ‘Yeah. Give me a minute, though, ‘kay?’ I handed her my champagne glass. ‘And don’t let them attack Stephanie,’ I murmur to my best friend.

But escaping is no easy task. I am stopped at least five times by well-wishers who want to tell me that they always knew I had such a good heart.

Ha.

Finally- I can pour myself a glass of my raspberry iced tea to stave off an impending headache and head toward the stairs to escape to my bedroom, just for a couple of minutes.

My mother grabs my arm. ‘Where are you going?’

I point down at my six-hundred-dollar Jimmy Choo pumps. ‘Blister. I just want to grab a Band-Aid.’

Mom’s green eyes- the ones everyone is always saying are identical to my own- narrow slightly, but her grip eases on my arm. ‘Everyone is so proud of you,’ she says, looking both relieved and delighted. ‘Holly Scherwitz said she wouldn’t be surprised to see you win a Nobel Peace Prize someday.’

Inside, I am cracking up in bitter amusement, but years of training in social appropriateness have me merely lifting my eyebrows. ‘I hope you told her that was absurd.’

Mom’s smile slips. ‘It is not absurd. It is admirable what you are doing.’

Moving to the middle of nowhere to help one of our injured veterans?’

‘Except it is not the middle of nowhere, is it? It is a one-hour plane ride, thanks to your and Dad’s interference.’

Mom does not bother to look guilty. ‘Olivia, honey. You would not have lasted a day in El Salvador or wherever it was you were going to build houses.

There are plenty of people right here at home that need help. And we are so proud of you for doing this.’

I give her a look. ‘Uh-huh. Is that why you guys did not speak to me for a week when I first told you about it?’

‘We were in shock,’ Mom says, unruffled. ‘Your father and I had no idea you weren’t happy in business school, and of course, we’d always envisioned you taking over the company-’

It is times like these that I wish my parents were old money instead of second-generation money. Each of my friends is richer than the next, but most of their families’ wealth goes back to some 1800s railroad or some industry whose income is self-generating by now. Not in my case.

My grandfather had the whole American-dream syndrome going on and changed his midwestern middle-class destiny, building a highly respected advertising firm instead. Dad only built on his father’s success, and it is fully expected to remain a family affair.

And I am an only child. No pressure.

‘I might still take over the company, Mom. I just need to get away from all this, you know? The only time I leave Manhattan is to go to the Hamptons in the summer or Saint-

Tropez in January. I mean, you have always said you do not want me to be one of those girls.'

Mom shakes her head to interrupt me. 'I know. Believe me, as much as I play the New York society game, I do want you to know that there is a big world out there, Olivia. But are you sure you do not want to stay a little closer to home? There is a facility out in Queens, and...'

'I'm already committed, Mom,' I say gently. 'Mr. Langdon's already sent a check to cover my travel expenses and I'm expected next Friday.'

Mom sighs. 'Can't a grown man arrange for his care? Something is weird about his father having to do all the planning.'

'You are the one who connected me with the Langdon's in the first place. They are legit. Plus, Paul is invalid. If he could arrange for his care, he would not need care.' I say this as patiently as possible. It is a clear indication of just how small my mom's world is, despite her good intentions.

She does not know anyone who has gone to war, much less been injured.

Not that I do, for that matter. Park Avenue is not exactly swarming with members of the U.S. armed forces.

'Well,' Mom says, taking a deep breath and pushing my long hair over my shoulder affectionately, 'it's lucky he has a pretty girl like you to take care of him.'

I smile wanly. I have been hearing this refrain all evening, and it makes me slightly ill. Not only because it is condescending to the poor guy I will be caring for, but because it makes me into some sweet, saintly figure.

Only two other people in this house know the truth about me. My mother is not one of them.

‘Hurry back down,’ Mom says. ‘The Austen’s said they hadn’t had a chance to talk to you yet.’

Part: 4

Probably because I have been dodging them. Annamarie Austen is the catty kind of gossip I have avoided like the plague in recent months, and Jeff Austen stares too long at my boobs.

‘I’ll be fast,’ I say before fleeing up the winding staircase to fetch my imaginary Band-Aid. My feet are far too used to being pinched in high heels to be plagued by blisters. I just won’t- need- five minutes to myself. A chance to be away from everyone’s misplaced fawning and the crushing pressure in my chest every time I look at Ethan.

But my bedroom is not the solitary sanctuary I imagined. Far from it.

I jump in surprise, but a part of me is not surprised at all to see him in here.

Him being the iceberg that destroyed my life. It is only appropriate that he also be around to watch me sink.

Now three people in the house know the truth about me.

‘Michael,’ I say, keeping my voice calm. Polite. I am always polite.

‘Liv.’

Michael St. Claire is one of those amiable, good-looking guys who attract friends- and girls- like a magnet. He gets his dark brown hair perfectly styled at a salon that costs about as much as my own, and his light golden skin is the gift of great Italian genes on his mother's side. He has been one of my best friends for as long as I can remember.

When he was seven, they had spent a summer exploring their neighborhood in Dawson, Minnesota, looking for treasure and wound up with a garden shed full of weird sh*t: an old top hat, a busted radio, two tire spokes, and the rusted frame of a bicycle. They had found adventure in whatever sh*tty-ass town their mom had happened to dump them. Now they would never have another adventure. She would never climb, or bike, or bet him five dollars; she could still beat him in a footrace. She would always need help to bathe, to get on and off the toilet.

And it was all Luke Hanrahan's fault. He had messed with Dayna's car, freaked with the steering in advance of the showdown, forcing her off the road.

Marcel knew it.

'Mom went on a date last night,' Dayna said, obviously trying to change the subject.

'So...?' Marcel said. He was still vaguely annoyed. Besides, everywhere they went, his mom found some new loser to date.

Dayna shrugged. 'She seemed into it. And she would not tell me who.'

'She was probably embarrassed,' Marcel said. In the silence, he heard banging from outside-someone was going

through the Dumpsters. Dayna leaned forward to look out the window.

‘Sh*t,’ she said.

‘Little Kelly?’ he said, and Dayna nodded. Little Bill Kelly had to be thirty and at least six foot five, but his dad, Bill Kelly, had been police chief for twenty years before his retirement, and everyone knew him as Big Kelly. Marcel had only ever seen Big Kelly once, and even then, only for a second, when he had accidentally biked out in front of Bill’s car. Bill had leaned on the horn and shouted for Marcel to be careful.

Marcel sighed, eased Dayna’s legs off his lap, and stood up. Through the window, he could see Little Kelly balancing on the steel drum full of old grease, methodically sorting through one of the Dumpsters sandwiched up against the back of Dot’s Diner, just next to the kitchen door. It was the third time in a month he had been picking garbage.

Marcel did not bother putting on a shirt. He crossed the short concrete alley that divided their apartment from the diner, careful to avoid the broken glass. The kitchen boys drank beer during their shift sometimes.

‘Hey, man,’ Marcel said, deliberately loud, deliberately cheerful. Little Kelly straightened up like he had been electrocuted. He climbed down unsteadily from the steel drum.

‘I’m not doing anything,’ he said, avoiding Marcel’s gaze. Other than the stubble on his chin, Little Kelly had the face of an overgrown baby. He had once been a star athlete, a good student, too, but had gotten screwed in the head over in Afghanistan... Or Iraq... like- one of those. Now he rode the buses all day and forgot to come home. Once Marcel had passed Little Kelly sitting cross-legged at the corner of the road, crying loudly.

‘You are looking for something?’ Marcel noticed that Little Kelly had made a small trash pile at the foot of the Dumpster, of tin foil wrappers, metal coils, bottle caps, and a broken plate. Little Kelly looked at him for a minute, jaw working like he was trying to chew through the leather. Then, abruptly, he pushed past Marcel and disappeared around the corner. Marcel squatted and started to gather up all the crap Little Kelly had removed from the Dumpster. It was already hot, and the alley smelled.

Just then he sensed movement behind him. Thinking Little Kelly had returned, he straightened and spun around, saying, ‘You really shouldn’t be back here-’ The words dried up in his throat. Natalie Velez was standing behind him, leaning her weight onto her good foot, looking clean and showered and pretty and like she belonged anywhere else but here.

‘Hi,’ she said, smiling. His first, instinctive response was to walk past her, go into the house, slam the door, and suffocate himself. But of course, he could not. Holy sh*t... Nat Velez was standing in front of him, and he was shirtless. And had not brushed his teeth. Or showered. And he was holding tinfoil from the trash.

‘I was just cleaning up...’ He trailed off helplessly.

Nat’s eyes ticked down to his bare chest, then up to his hair, which was in all probability sticking straight up.

‘Oh my God.’ Her face began to turn pink. ‘I should have called. I am so sorry. Did you just get up or something?’

‘No. No, not at all. I was just -’ Marcel tried not to talk too forcefully, or breathe too hard, in case his breath was rank. ‘Look, can you give me a minute? Just wait here?’

‘Of course.’ Nat was even cuter when she blushed. She looked like a cookie that had been iced for Christmas.

‘One minute,’ Marcel repeated. Inside, Marcel sucked in a deep breath. Holy sh*t. Nat Velez. He did not even have time to worry about the fact that she was seeing his house, his crappy little apartment, and had had to walk past the grease traps being emptied, had gone in her little sandals past the sodden bits of spinach that got trekked out of the diner by the cooks, past the Dumpsters and their smell. In the bathroom, he brushed his teeth and gargled with mouthwash. He smelled his underarms-not bad-and put on deodorant just in case.

He ran water through his hair and pulled on a clean white T-shirt, one that showed just a bit of the tattoo that covered most of his chest and wrapped around his right shoulder and forearm. His hair was already sticking up again. He rammed on a baseball hat.

Part: 5

Good... decent, at least. He sprayed on a bit of this man’s body-spray thing his mom had gotten for free at Walmart, feeling like a douche, but thinking it was better to feel like a douche than to smell like an asshole.

Outside, Nat was doing an excellent job of pretending not to notice that Marcel lived in a falling-down apartment behind a diner.

‘Hey.’ She smiled again, big, and bright, and he felt his insides do a weird turnover. He hoped Dayna was not watching out the window. ‘Sorry about, like, barging upon you.’ ‘That’s okay.’

‘I was going to call,’ she said. ‘I texted Maggie for your number. Sorry.’

But then I thought it might be better to talk in person.’
‘It’s totally fine.’ Marcel’s voice came out more harshly than he had intended. Sh*t. He was screwing this up already. He coughed and crossed his arms, trying to look casual. It was because his hands suddenly felt like meat hooks at the end of his arms, and he had forgotten what to do with them.

‘How’s your ankle?’ An Ace bandage was wrapped thickly around her ankle and foot, which made a funny contrast to her bare legs.

‘Sprained.’ Nat made a face. ‘I’ll live, but-’ For a brief second, her face spasmed, like she was in pain.

‘Look, Marcel, is there someplace we can go? Like, to talk?’

There was no way he was taking her inside. Not an icicle’s chance in hell. He did not want Nat gaping at Dayna or, worse, trying too hard to be nice.

‘How did you get here?’ he asked, thinking she might have a car.

Again, she blushed. ‘I had my dad drop me,’ she said.

He did not ask how she had figured out where he lived. Like all things in Carp, it was usually just a question of asking around. The problem was where to take her.

He could not go into the diner. His mom was working. That left Meth Row. Nat walked slowly, still limping, although she was in less pain than she had been last night. But she took the first opportunity to sit down: on the rusted fender of an abandoned, wheel-less- Buick. All its windows were shattered, and the seats were speckled with bird sh*t, the leather torn up by tiny animals.

‘I wanted to thank you again,’ Nat said. ‘You were so - You were great.

For helping me last night.’ Marcel felt vaguely disappointed, as he often felt when interacting with other people when the reality failed to meet his expectations. Or in this case, his fantasies. Some part of him had been hoping she had come over to confess that she had fallen madly in love with him. Or she would skip the words altogether, and strain onto her tiptoes and open her mouth and let him kiss her. Except she could not stand on her toes with her ankle the way it was, which is one of the 2,037 ways his fantasy was unrealistic. He said, ‘It’s not a problem.’

She twisted her mouth like she had swallowed something sour. For a second, she did not say anything. Then she blurted, ‘Did you hear Cory Walsh and Felix Harte were arrested?’ He shook his head, and she clarified, ‘Drunk and disorderly conduct. And trespassing.’ She shifted her weight. ‘You think Panic is over?’ ‘No way,’ he said. ‘The cops are too stupid to stop it, anyway.’ She nodded but did not look convinced. ‘So, what do you think will happen next?’

‘No idea,’ he said. He knew that Nat was asking him for a hint. He swallowed back a bad taste in his mouth. She knew he liked her, and she was trying to use him.

‘I think we can use each other,’ she said abruptly, and it was this fact-the fact of her acknowledgment, her honesty -that made him want to keep listening.

‘Use each other how?’ he asked. She picked at the hem of her skirt. It looked like it was made of terry cloth, which made him think of towels, which made him think of Nat in a towel. The sun was so bright, he was dizzy.

‘We made a deal,’ she said, looking up at him. Her eyes were dark, eager, and sweet, like the eyes of a puppy. ‘If either of us wins, we split the cash fifty-fifty.’

Marcel was so startled; he could not say anything for a minute.

‘Why?’

Why- he asked finally. ‘Why me? You do not even -I mean; we hardly even know each other.’ What about Maggie? he almost said.

‘It’s just a feeling I have,’ she said, and once again he found her honesty appealing. ‘You are good at this game.

You know things.’ It seemed somehow surprising that Nat Velez, with her thick, perfect hair and slicked lip-gloss lips, would speak so frankly about a subject most people avoided. It was like hearing a supermodel fart: surprising and kind of thrilling. She plowed on: ‘We can help each other. Share information. Team up against the others. We have more of a chance of getting to Joust that way. And then-’ She gestured with her hands.

‘Then we’ll have to face off...’

Part: 6

Marcel said.

‘But if one wins, we both win,’ Nat said, smiling up at him. He had no intention of letting anyone else win. Then again, he did not care about the money, either. He had a different goal in mind. She knew that or sensed it somehow.

So, he said, ‘Yeah, okay. Partners.’

‘Allies,’ Nat said, and stuck out her hand, formally. It felt soft, and slightly sweaty.

She stood up, laughing. ‘It’s settled, then.’ She could not crane onto her tiptoes to kiss him, so she just grabbed his shoulders and planted a kiss on the side of his neck. She giggled.

‘Now I have to do the other side, so you’re even.’

And he knew then that he was going to fall head over heels for her this summer.

Afterward, no one knew who had posted the video online; it appeared on so many pages simultaneously, and spread to everybody else so quickly, it was impossible to determine its point of origin, although many people suspected it was Joey Addison or Jack Wong, just because they were both d*icks and two years ago had secretly filmed, and posted, videos of the girls’ locker rooms.

It was not even that interesting-just a couple of jerky shots of Ray and Zev swinging at each other, shoulders butting up into the frame as a crowd formed; and then flashing lights, people screaming, a moment when the feed went dead. Then more images: sweeping lights and police officers’ distorted voices, tiny and harmless sounding in the recording, and one close-up of Nat, mouth wide, with one arm around Maggie and the other around Marcel.

Then darkness... Marcel kept a copy on his hard drive, so he could freeze-frame on that final moment when Nat looked so scared, and he was helping support her. Just a few hours later an email made the rounds as well.

Subject line: blank. From:
judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

The message was simple, with only 3 or 4 lines.

Loose lips sink ships.

Nobody tells. Or else.

TUESDAY, JUNE

Date of the 28th

Maggie-

‘YOU’RE SURE THIS IS LEGIT, RIGHT?’ JOH JOH WAS SITTING forward in the driver’s seat, both hands on the wheel, maneuvering the car over a pitted one-lane dirt track. His hair looked even more exuberant than usual, as though he had tried to style it with a vacuum cleaner. He was wearing his dad’s old Virginia Tech sweatshirt, loose flannel pajama bottoms, and flip-flops. When he came to Maggie he had announced, with a certain pride, that he had not yet showered. ‘You’re not going to get axed to death by some psychopath, right?’

‘Shut up, Joh Joh.’ Maggie reached out to shove him, and he jerked the wheel, nearly sending them into one of the ditches that ran along both sides of the road.

‘That’s no way to treat your driver,’ he said, pretending to be offended.

‘Fine. Shut up, driver.’ There was an anxious feeling in Maggie’s stomach. The trees here were so thick, they completely blocked out the sun.

‘Just looking out for you, malady,’ Joh Joh said, smiling, showing off the overlap in his teeth. ‘I don’t want my best girl to be turned into a lampshade.’ ‘I thought Avery was your best girl,’ Maggie said. She had meant it as a joke, but the words came out sounding bitter. Like a bitter, heartbroken, lonely spinster. Which she kind of was. Not a spinster-you could not be a spinster at eighteen, she did not think. But close...’

Come on, Maggie,' Joh Joh said. He looked hurt. 'You've always been my best girl.' Maggie kept her face to the window. They would arrive any second. But she felt a little better now.

Joh Joh had that effect on her-like a human anti-anxiety pill. The day after the challenge at the water towers, Maggie had overslept, waking only when an anonymous text pinged on her phone: Quit now, before you get hurt. She was so shaken, she had spent fifteen minutes searching for her car keys before remembering she had stashed them on the hook by the door, then got fired from Walmart when she showed up twenty minutes late for her shift.

And suddenly she had found herself blubbing in the parking lot. A week and a half earlier, she had had a boyfriend and a job-not an excellent job, but still a job. A little money in her pocket. Now she had nothing. No boyfriend, no job, no money. And someone wanted to make sure she did not play Fright.

Then, out of nowhere, she had been attacked by a dog with the biggest tongue she had ever seen. Maybe attacked was the wrong word, since the dog was just licking her-but still, she had never been much of an animal person, and it had seemed like an attack. And some crazy old lady carrying a sh*t ton of grocery bags had offered her a job on the spot, even though Maggie had snot dripped from her nose and was wearing a tank top streaked with salad dressing, which she had not noticed in her rush to get out of the house.

The woman's name was Anne.

'Muppets took a shine to you,' she had said. Muppet was the name of the dog with the long tongue. 'He does not usually get on with strangers. You seem like you are natural with animals.' Maggie had stayed quiet. She did not want to admit that she thought animals, like pimples, were best to

ignore. If you fuss too much with them, it will backfire. The only time she had tried to keep a pet, an anemic-looking goldfish she had called Star, it had been dead within thirty-two hours. But she said yes when Anne asked if she would be into doing some pet sitting and light chores. It was \$150 a week, cash in hand, which was the same as she would have made working part-time for Walmart.

Suddenly the trees opened, and they arrived. Maggie immediately felt relieved. She did not know what she had been, after what Joh Joh said, a dingy barn full of rusting farm tools and machetes-but instead she saw a sprawling red farmhouse and a large circular parking area, neatly trimmed of grass. She could see a barn, too, but it was not dingy-and next to it, a series of whitewashed sheds.

As soon as she opened the door, several roosters came trotting toward her, and a dog more than one dog? ...Began furiously barking. Anne emerged from the house and waved.

‘Holy sh*t,’ Joh Joh said. He looked impressed. ‘It’s a zoo.’ ‘See? Not a human lampshade insight.’ Maggie slid out of the car, then ducked so she could say goodbye.

‘Thanks, Joh Joh.’ He saluted. ‘Text when you need a pickup, ma’am.’ Maggie closed the door. Anne crossed the yard toward her.

‘Is that your boyfriend?’ Anne said, shielding her eyes with one hand, as Joh Joh began to turn around.

This was so unexpected, Maggie’s face got hot. ‘No, no,’ she said quickly, angling her body away from the car, as though Joh Joh, in case he was still watching, would be able to read the conversation in her body language.

‘He’s cute,’ Anne said matter-of-factly. She waved, and Joh Joh tapped the horn before pulling away. The blush grew into an all-over body inferno. Maggie crossed her arms and then dropped them again. Fortunately, Anne did not seem to notice.

‘I’m glad you came.’ Anne smiled, as though Maggie had just dropped by for a social visit. ‘Let me show you around.’

Maggie was glad that Anne seemed to approve of her choice of outfit: clean jeans, sneakers, and a soft, nubby henley shirt, which had belonged to Joh- John before he accidentally shrunk it. She had not wanted to look sloppy, but then again, Anne had told her to wear clothes she could muck up, and she had not wanted to look like she had not listened.

They started toward the house. The roosters were still running around like crazy, and Maggie noticed a chicken pen on the other side of the yard, in which a dozen yellow-feathered chicks were strutting and pecking and preening in the sun. The dogs kept up their racket. There were three of them, including Muppet, pacing around a small enclosure, barking lustily.

‘You have a lot of animals,’ Maggie pointed out, and then immediately felt like an idiot. She tucked her hands into her sleeves.

But Anne laughed. ‘It is awful, isn’t it? I just cannot stop.’ ‘So-o, is this, like, a farm?’ Maggie did not see any farming equipment, but she did not know anyone who kept chickens for fun.

Again, Anne laughed. ‘Hardly. I give the eggs away to the pantry sometimes. But I do not pull up a damn thing besides bird poop, dog poop, poop of all kinds.’ She held the door to the house open for Maggie. Maggie thought that she would spend the whole summer shoveling sh*t. ‘My husband, Larry, loved animals,’ Anne continued as she followed Maggie into the

house. They entered the prettiest kitchen Maggie had ever seen.

Even Nat's kitchen did not compare. The walls were cream and yellow; the cupboards tawny wood, bleached white from the sun, which poured through two large windows. The counters were spotless. No ants here. Against one wall were shelves arranged with blue-and-white pottery and small porcelain figurines: miniature horses, cats, donkeys, and pigs. Maggie was almost afraid to move, as one step in the wrong direction might cause everything to shatter.

'Tea?' Anne asked. Maggie shook her head. She did not know anyone who drank tea in real life-only British people in TV miniseries. Anne filled a kettle and plunked it on the stove. 'We moved here from Chicago.'

'Really?' Maggie burst out. The farthest she had ever been from Carp was Albany. Once on a school trip, and once when her mom had a court date because she had been driving with a suspended license. 'What's Chicago like?'

'Cold,' Anne said. 'Freeze your balls off ten months out of the year. But the other two are pure joy.' Maggie did not respond. Anne did not seem like the type who would say balls, and Maggie liked her a little better for it.

'Larry and I worked in ad sales. We swore we would make a change someday.' Anne shrugged. 'Then he died, and I did.'

Once again, Maggie did not say anything. She wanted to ask how Larry had died, and when, but did not know if it was appropriate. She did not want Anne to think she was obsessed with death or something. When the water had boiled, Anne filled her mug and then directed Maggie back through the door where they had come. It was funny, walking across the yard

with Anne, while the steam rose from her tea and mingled with the soft mist of morning. Maggie felt like she was in a movie about a farm somewhere far away. They rounded the corner of the house, and the dogs began to bark again.

‘Shut it!’ Anne said, but good-naturedly.

They did not listen. She kept up a nonstop stream of conversation as they walked. ‘This one’s the feed shed’- this, as she unlocked one of the small, whitewashed sheds, pushing it open with one hand- I try to keep everything organized so I do not end up throwing grain to the dogs and trying to force kibble on a chick. Remember to turn off the lights before you lock them up. I do not even want to tell you what my electricity bills are like.’

‘This is where the shovels and rakes go’-they were at another shed - ‘buckets, horseshoes, any kind of crap you find lying around that does not seem to fit anywhere else. Got it? Am I going too fast?’

Maggie shook her head, and then, realizing Anne was not looking at her, said, ‘No.’

She realized she was not nervous anymore. She liked the feel of the sun on her shoulders and the smell of dark, wet ground everywhere. Some of what she was smelling was animal sh*t, but it did not smell that bad-just like growth and newness. Anne showed her the stables, where two horses stood quietly in the half-dark, like sentinels guarding something precious.

Maggie had never been so close to a horse before, and she laughed aloud when Anne gave her a carrot and instructed her to feed it to the black one, Lady Belle, and Maggie felt its soft, leathery muzzle and the gentle pressure of its teeth.

'They were racehorses. Both were injured. Saved 'em from being shot,' Anne said as they left the stables.

'Shot?' Maggie repeated. Anne nodded. For the first time, she looked angry. 'That is what happens when they are no good for running anymore. The owner takes a shotgun to their head.' Anne had saved all the animals from one gruesome fate or another: the dogs and horses from death, the chickens, and roosters from various diseases when no one else had cared enough to spend the money to nurse them. There were turkeys she had saved from slaughter, cats she had rescued from the street in Hudson, and even an enormous potbellied pig named Tinkerbelle, which had once been an unwanted runt. Maggie could not imagine that it had ever been the brunt of anything.

'All she wanted was a little love,'

Anne said as they passed the pen where Tinkerbelle was lolling in the mud. 'That, and about a pound of feed a day.' She laughed.

Finally, they came to a tall, fenced-in enclosure. The sun had finally broken free of the trees and refracted through the rising mist; it was practically blinding. The fence encircled an area of at least a few acres—mostly open lands, patches of dirt, and tall grass, but some trees, too. Maggie could not see any animals.

For the first time all morning, Anne grew quiet. She sipped her tea, squinting in the sun, staring off through the chain-link fence. After a few minutes, Maggie could not stand it anymore.

'What are we waiting for?' She asked me.

'Sh-h-h,' Anne said. 'Look... they'll come.'

Maggie crossed her arms, biting back a sigh. The dew had soaked through her sneakers. Her feet were too cold, and her neck was too hot. There. There was a movement by a small cluster of trees. She squinted. A large, dark mass, which she had taken for a rock, shook itself. Then it stood. And as it stood, another form emerged from the shadow of the trees, and the two animals circled each other briefly, and then lopped gracefully into the sun.

Maggie's mouth went dry.

Tigers...

She blinked. Impossible. But they were still there, and coming closer: two tigers, tigers, like you would find at a circus. Massive square heads and huge jaws, bodies muscled and rippling, coats glossy in the sun. Anne whistled sharply. Maggie jumped. Both tigers swung their heads toward the sound, and Maggie lost her breath. Their eyes were flat, incurious, and old-impossibly old, as though instead of looking forward, their eyes saw back to a distant past. They ambled up to the fence, so close that Maggie stepped backward, quickly, terrified. So, close to them she could smell them, feel the heat of their bodies.

'How?' she finally managed to ask, which was not what she meant, but good enough. A thousand thoughts were colliding in her head.

'More rescues,' Anne said calmly.

'They get sold on the black market. Sold, then abandoned when they are too big, or put down when there is no one to care for them.' As she spoke, she reached her hand through a gap in the fence and petted one of the tigers-like it was an overgrown house cat.

When she saw Maggie gaping, she laughed. 'They're all right once they've been fed,' she said. 'Just don't try and cuddle up when they're hungry.' 'I don't-I won't have to go in there, will I?' Maggie was rooted to the ground, paralyzed with fear and wonder.

They were so big, so close. One of the tigers yawned, and she could make out the sharp curve of its teeth, white as bone.

Part: 7

'No, no,' Anne said. 'Most of the time, I just chuck the food in through the gate. Here, I will show you.' Anne walked her to the padlocked gate, which to Maggie looked alarmingly flimsy. On the other side of the fence, the Tigers followed-languidly, as though by coincidence.

Maggie was not fooled, though. That is how predators were. They sat back and waited, lured you into feeling safe, and then they pounced. She wished Joh Joh were here. She did not wish Nat were here. Nat would flip. She hated big animals of any kind.

Even poodles made her jumpy. When they turned their backs on the Tigers' pen and returned to the house, Maggie's stomach started to unknot, although she still had the impression the Tigers were watching her and kept picturing their sharp claws slotting into her back. Anne showed her where she kept all the keys to the sheds, hanging from neatly labeled hooks in the 'mudroom,' as she called it, where Maggie could also find spare rubber boots like the kind Anne wore, mosquito repellent, gardening shears, and suntan and calamine lotions.

After that, Maggie went to work. She fed the chickens while Anne instructed her how to scatter the feed, and laughed

aloud when the birds piled together, pecking frantically, like one enormous, feathered, many-headed creature.

Anne showed her how to chase the roosters back in the pen before letting out the dogs to run around, and Maggie was surprised that Muppet remembered her, and immediately ran several times around her ankles, as though in greeting.

Then there was mucking the stables (as Maggie had suspected, this involved horse poop, but it was not as bad as she had thought,) and brushing the horses' coats with special, stiff-bristled brushes. Then helping Anne prune the wisteria, which had begun to colonize the north side of the house. By this time, Maggie was sweating freely, even with her sleeves rolled up. The sun was high and hot, and her backache from bending over and straightening up again.

But she was happy, happier than she had been in forever. She could almost forget that the rest of the world existed, that she had never been dumped by Matt Hepley or made the Jump in the first place. Panic. She could forget Panic. She was surprised when Anne called an end to the day, saying it was almost one o'clock. While Maggie waited for Joh Joh to return for her, Anne made her a tuna sandwich with mayonnaise she had made herself and tomatoes she had grown in her garden. Maggie was afraid to sit down at the table since she was so dirty, but Anne set a place for her, so she did. She thought it was the best thing she had ever eaten.'

Hey there, cowgirl,' Joh Joh said when Maggie slid into the car. He still had not changed out of his pajama pants. He made a big show of sniffing. 'What's that smell?'

'Shut up,' she said and punched him in the arm. He pretended to wince. As Maggie rolled down her window, she caught a glimpse of herself in the side mirror. Her face was red,

and her hair was a mess, and her chest was still wet with sweat, but she was surprised to find that she looked kind of - pretty.

‘How was it?’ Joh Joh asked as they began thumping down the drive again. He had gotten her an iced coffee from 7-Eleven: lots of sugar, lots of cream, just how she liked it. She told him about the runt pig that had ballooned to a huge size, the horses, the chickens, and roosters. She saved the Tigers for last. Joh Joh was taking a sip of her coffee and nearly choked.

‘You know that’s illegal, right?’ he said. She rolled her eyes. ‘So are the pants you are wearing. If you do not tell me, I will not.’

‘These pants?’ Joh Joh pretended to be offended. ‘I wore these just for you.’

‘You can take them off just for me,’ Maggie said, and then blushed, realizing how it sounded.

‘Anytime,’ Joh Joh said, and grinned at her. She punched him again.

She was still fizzy with happiness. It was a twenty-minute ride back to downtown Carp, if the Motel 6, the post office, and the short string of greasy shops and bars could be counted as downtown, but Joh Joh claimed to have figured out a shortcut.

Maggie went quiet when they turned onto Coral Lake, which could not have been more inaccurately named: there was no water in sight, nothing but fallen logs and patchy, burnt-bare stubs of trees, because of a fire that had raged there several years ago. The road ran parallel to Jack Donahue’s property, and it was bad luck. Maggie had been to Coral Lake only a few times.

Trigger-Happy Jack was known for being constantly drunk, and half-insane, and for owning an arsenal of weapons.

His property was fenced in and guarded by dogs and who knew what else. When his fence came into view, pushing right up to the road, she half expected him to come banging out of his house and start taking potshots at the car. But he did not. Several dogs came running across the yard, though, barking madly. These dogs were nothing like Anne's. They were skinny, snarling, and mean-looking. They had almost passed the limits of Trigger-Happy Jack's property when something caught Maggie's eye.

Part: 8

Sh*t-

I, NO!

Then Jack Donahue-paunchy, shirtless, wearing only a pair of saggy boxers-lifted his rifle and began to fire.

Pop...

Pop...

Pop...

Shots exploded- louder, sharper, than Marcel had expected, the first thing that had truly thrown him off guard. He had never been so close to gunfire.

In the front yard, Trigger-Happy Jack was still screaming.

'You-cock-suckers-dead-as-a-doornail-I'll-bury-you-all-you-freakers!!!!'

Tick.

It would not be long now. Donahue would call the police officers at some point. He would have to.

Marcel sprinted around the house. His breath was caught somewhere in his throat, like each time he inhaled he was taking in the glass. He did not know what had happened to the other players, where Ray was, whether anyone had made it inside yet. He thought he heard a whisper in the dark-he assumed Maggie and Nat had taken up their positions, as planned. At the back of the house was a half-rotten porch, cluttered with dark shapes - Marcel vaguely registered a refrigerator before he saw the distended screen door, barely hanging on its hinges. The shots were still cracking through the air. One, two, three, four.

Tick...

He did not stop to think. He flung open the door.

He was in.

Part: 9

'Stop!' she nearly screamed.

'Stop.'

Joh Joh slammed on the brakes.

'What? Jesus, Maggie. What?'

But she was already out of the car, jogging back toward a sagging scarecrow-at least, it looked like a scarecrow slumped on the ground, leaning back against Donahue's fence. Her stomach was tight with fear, and she had the weirdest sense of being watched. There was something wrong with the dummy.

It was too crudely made, too useless. There were no farms on this side of Carroll Lake, no reason for a scarecrow, especially one that looked like it had been dumped from the trunk of a car.

When she reached the scarecrow, she hesitated for a second, as it might suddenly come to life and bite her. Then she lifted its head, which was slumped forward on a spindly stuffed neck.

In place of features, the scarecrow had words written neatly, in marker, on its blank canvas face.

FRIDAY, MIDNIGHT.

THE GAME MUST GO ON.

FRIDAY, JULY 1

Marcel THE CROWD WAS SMALLER ON FRIDAY NIGHT; THE atmosphere- tense, unhappy. Nervous. There was no beer, no music, no bursts of laughter. Just a few dozen people huddled silently fifty feet down the road from Trigger-Happy Jack's fence, massed together, lit up white-faced in the glare of the bouncing headlights.

When Joh- John cut the engine, Marcel could hear Nat's ragged breathing. Marcel had spent the ride trying to distract her by doing easy magic tricks, like making a joker appear in her jacket pocket and a penny vanish from her palm. Now he said, 'Just follow the plan, okay? Follow the plan and everything will be okay.'

Nat nodded, but she looked sick- like she might vomit. She was deathly afraid of dogs; she had told him. Also: ladders, heights, darkness, and the feeling you get in the middle of the night when you check your phone and see no one has texted. As far as he could tell, she was afraid of everything. And yet, she had decided to play. This made him like her even more. And she had chosen him, Marcel, as her ally.

Joh- John said nothing. Marcel wondered what he was thinking. He had always thought Joh John was nice enough, and

book smart for sure, but just like a big dumb sheepdog of a person who followed Maggie everywhere. But- Marcel was starting to change his mind.

During the drive, Joh Joh's eyes had clicked to his for a second in the rearview, and Marcel had detected warning there. The night was clear and still.

The moon was high and halfway full, and turning everything to the silhouette, drawing angles around the fence. Still, it was dark. A flashlight went on and off several times, a silent signal. Maggie, Joh Joh, Nat, and Marcel walked toward it. Marcel had the urge to take Nat's hand, but Nat was hugging herself tightly.

At least Marcel had had time to plan, to prepare. If Nat had not told him about the dummy Maggie had spotted on Tuesday, he might not have known about the newest challenge until this morning. The email had come to all the players simultaneously from an encrypted address, judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

Location: Coral Lake Road

Time: Midnight-

Goal: Take a prize from the house. Bonus: Find the desk in the gunroom and take what is hidden there.

'All right.' Diggin was speaking quietly as they drew up close to the group. They were late. 'Players, step forward.'

They did, detaching themselves from the people who had come to watch. Fewer players, fewer spectators. After the bust, everyone was jumpy.

Part: 10

-And-

Carroll Lake Road was bad luck. Trigger- Happy Jack was bad-all bad. A psycho and a drunk and worse.

Marcel knew he would not think twice about shooting them. The beam of a flashlight swept over each of the players in turn. It felt like the minutes were swelling into hours. The counting took forever.

Marcel could see Ray Hanrahan, chewing gum loudly, standing on the outer edge of the circle of players. His face was concealed in shadow. Marcel felt a familiar clutch of anger. Strange how it did not go away; over the past two years, it just was growing, like cancer in his stomach.

‘Walsh is missing,’ -Digging said finally. ‘So is Merl.’

‘They’re out, then,’ someone said.

‘It’s midnight.’ -Digging was still practically whispering. The wind lifted the trees, hissed at them, as though it knew they were trespassing. The dogs were still quiet, though. Sleeping, or waiting. ‘The second challenge-’

‘Second challenge?’ Zev broke in.

‘What about the water towers?’ ‘Invalidated,’ -Digging said. ‘Not everyone got to go.’ Zev spat on the ground, and Maggie made a noise of protest. -Digging ignored them.

‘When I say go,’ he said. He paused. For a moment, everything was going still. Marcel could feel the slow drum of his heart beating in the hollow of his chest. And as they stood there in the dark, waiting, it occurred to him that here, somewhere in this crowd, where the judges hiding behind familiar faces, enjoying it.

‘Go,’ -Digging said.

‘Go!’ Marcel said to Maggie and Nat, at the same time. Maggie nodded and took Nat’s hand; they vanished together into the dark, Nat moving stiff-legged, still limping slightly, like a broken doll.

Marcel made straight for the fence like they had agreed like he had scoped the place out and knew what he was doing. And as he predicted, a half-dozen people ran after him in silence, doubled over as though, even now, they were being watched.

Nevertheless, much of the group did not move right away. They floated aimlessly to the fence, pacing it, watching, too scared to try to climb. They would all be disqualified for doing nothing. Still, they stood there, pacing, watching the bleak house, watching the shadow-people climb the fence, everything silent except for the occasional creak of metal, a muttered curse, and the wind. Marcel was one of the first to up the fence. There were other players around him-people grunting and breathing hard, bodies knocking into, his-but he ignored them, focused on the bite of chain link on his palms and his breathing and the seconds running forward like water.

It was all about timing. Just like magic tricks: planning, mastery, staying calm under pressure. You could anticipate another person’s response; you could know what people would do, or say, or how they would react, even before they did.

Marcel knew it would not be long until Donahue came out with a rifle. At the top of the fence, he hung back, even though his adrenaline was pumping, telling him to go. Several other people-it was too dark to make out faces-dropped and hit the ground first, and even though they barely made a sound, the explosion of barking came right away. Four dogs-no, five-tore out from the back of the house, barking like mad.

Marcel felt every second like it had a different taste, a different texture from the second before it, like individual moments were ticking off in his head.

Tick. Someone was screaming. There would be points taken off for that. Tick. Only a few more seconds until the shooting would begin. Tick. Maggie and Nat should have reached the hole in the fence by now.

Tick...

He was airborne, and then he felt the impact of the ground and he was up and fumbling for the Mace in his pocket.

He did not head for the front of the house directly but instead made a loop, circumnavigating the small crowd of players, the dogs going crazy, snarling, and snapping. Some of the players were already climbing the fence again, trying to reach the safety of the other side. But- Marcel kept going...

Tick...

A dog came at him. He almost did not see it; it had its jaws around his arm before he pivoted and sprayed it, full-on, in the face. The dog dropped back, whimpering. Marcel kept going.

Tick.

Right on time, a light in the house clicked on. There was a roar-a sound that echoed out even over the chaos and the frantic sounds of barking and something crashed to the ground. A black shape rocketed out the front door, into the night. Even from one hundred yards, Marcel could make out the stream of individual courses.

#- Hashtag: (God damn mother freaking on and off b*tches get the hell off my yard you- pieces- of sh*t crapping d*ick wipe of as ass sucking pie hole puss-ie liker.)

Maggie-

MAGGIE AND NAT REACHED THE PLACE WHERE THE fence veered north, away from the road, just as the dogs began barking. Their timing was already all wrong. And Marcel was counting on them.

‘You got to move faster,’ Maggie said.

‘I’m trying,’ Nat said. Maggie could hear the strain in her voice. There was a volley of shouting from the yard-a cry of pain and the snarling of an enraged animal. Maggie felt her pulse beating frantically around her neck.

Focus.

Focus.

Stay calm.

They had reached the portion of the fence they had prepped yesterday. And no one had followed them. Good. Marcel had cut a makeshift door in the fence. Maggie gave it a solid push and it groaned open, giving her just enough room to squeeze through. Nat followed.

Suddenly Nat froze, her eyes wide, horrified.

‘I’m stuck,’ she whispered.

Maggie whirled around, impatient.

Nat’s left sleeve was snagged on the fence. She reached out and tugged it free.

‘You’re unstuck,’ she said. ‘Come on.’

But Nat did not move. 'I-I can't.' Her face was drawn, terrified. 'I'm not even.'

'You're not what?' Maggie was losing it. Marcel would be going at any minute; he expected them to stand guard.

They had made a pact. He was helping them; Maggie did not know why, but she did not care, either.

'I'm not even.' Nat's voice was high-pitched, hysterical. She was still standing, frozen, as though both legs had been rooted to the ground.

That is when Jack Donahue came blasting from the front door.

'God damn mother freaking sons of b*tches get the hell off my yard you- piece- of sh*t.'

'Come on.' Maggie grabbed Nat's arm and pulled, hard, dragging her across the lawn toward the house, ignoring the sound of Nat's whimpering, the words she was muttering under her breath. Counting. She was counting to ten, then down again. Maggie dug her nails harder into Nat's arm, almost wanting to hurt her. Jesus. They were running out of time, and Nat was losing it. She did not care about Nat's ankle, or that Nat was shaking, choking back sobs.

Pop...

Pop...

Pop...

Maggie jerked Nat down and into the shadows as Donahue thundered off the porch, gun up, firing. The light on the porch was white, half-blinding, and made him look like a character from a movie. Maggie's thighs were shaking.

She did not see Marcel. She could not see anyone-just shapes, blurring together in the darkness, and the small cone of light illuminating Donahue's back, the curl of hair on his shoulders, his flab, the awful butt of his rifle.

Where was Marcel? Maggie could hardly breathe. She pressed up against the side of the house, rocking her weight back onto her heels, trying to think. There was too much noise. And she did not know if Marcel had made it into the house already. What if he had not? What if he had screwed up?

'Stay here,' Maggie whispered. 'I'm going in.' 'Don't.' Nat turned to her; eyes wide, frantic. 'Don't leave me here.' Maggie gripped her shoulders. 'In exactly one minute, if I am not out yet, I want you to run back to the car. Okay? In exactly one minute.'

She did not even know if Nat heard her and almost did not care, at this point. She straightened up. Her body felt bloated and clumsy. And suddenly she registered several things at once: that the shots had happened and were no longer happening; that the front door had just opened and closed with a firm click.

Someone had gone in. Immediately, her body turned to ice. What if Marcel was inside? She, Maggie, was supposed to have been watching. She was supposed to have whistled if Donahue approached. But the front door had opened and closed. And she had not whistled.

She was no longer thinking. Instinctively, she pulled herself onto the porch and opened the front door, and slipped inside, into the hall. It stank of BO and old beer, and it was pitch-dark. Donahue had turned on a light earlier- that she had noticed, a bad omen, just as her left arm was snagged by the toothy bite of the fence-so why had he turned it off? Her heart surged into her throat, and she reached out with both hands,

grazing both walls lightly with her fingertips, centering herself in the hallway. She swallowed. She took several steps forward and heard a rustling, the creak of a footstep. She froze, expecting at any second for the lights to click on, for the barrel of a gun to shine directly in her heart. Nothing happened.

‘Marcel?’ she risked whispering in the dark.

Footsteps crossed quickly toward her. She fumbled along the wall and hit a doorknob. The door opened easily, and she slipped out of the hall, closing the door as quietly as possible, holding her breath. But the footsteps kept going. She heard the front door creak open and closed. Was- it Donahue? Marcel? Another player?

Here, moonlight filtered in through a large, curtainless window, and Maggie suddenly sucked in a breath. The walls were covered with metal, glinting dully in the milky light. Guns... Guns mounted on the walls, hanging from upended deer hooves, crisscrossing the ceiling. The gun room... She thought it even smelled faintly like gunpowder, but she might have been imagining it.

The room was cluttered with workbenches and overstuffed chairs, bleeding stuffing onto the floor. Underneath the window was a large desk. Maggie felt as if the air in the room were suddenly too thin; she felt breathless and dizzy, remembering the email she had received that morning. Bonus: Find the desk in the gunroom and take what is hidden there.

Maggie moved across the room to the desk, navigating the clutter of objects. She began with the drawers on the side-right and then left. Nothing. The shallow central drawer was loose, as though from frequent use. The gun was curled there, like an enormous black beetle, shiny, hard backed.

The bonus. She reached in, hesitated-then seized it quickly as it might bite her. Maggie felt nausea rising in her throat.

She hated guns.

‘What are you doing?’ Maggie spun around. She could just see Marcel silhouetted in the doorway, although it was too dark to make out his face.

‘Sh-h-h,’ Maggie whispered. ‘Keep your voice down.’

‘What the hell are you doing?’

Marcel took two steps across the room.

‘You were supposed to keep watch.’

‘I was.’ Before Maggie could explain further, Marcel cut her off.

‘Where’s Natalie?’

‘Outside,’ Maggie said. ‘I thought

I heard-’

‘Was this a trick?’

I will have to find out...

Interval: 8

Maggie

Chapter: 28

Part: 1

Marcel spoke quietly, but Maggie could hear the edge in his voice. ‘You get me to do the dirty work, then sneak in and grab the bonus? So, you could get ahead?’

Maggie stared at him. 'What?'

'Don't screw with me, Maggie.' Two more steps and Marcel- was- um like- there, directly in front of her. 'Don't lie to me.'

Maggie fought for breath. Tears were pushing at the back of her eyes. She knew they were being too loud. Too loud. Everything was all wrong. The gun in her hand felt awful, cold but also alive, like some alien creature that might suddenly roar to life.

'What are you doing here?' she finally said. 'You were supposed to get proof for us and get out.'

'I heard something,' Marcel fired back. 'I thought it might be one of the other players...'

The lights came on. Jack Donahue was standing in the doorway, eyes wild, chest slick with sweat. Then he was shouting, and the barrel of the gun was swinging toward them and there was an explosion of glass, and Maggie realized Marcel had just hurled a chair straight through the window. Everything was a fracture, roar, blur.

'Go, go, go!' Marcel was shouting, pushing Maggie toward the window. Maggie threw herself shoulder-first into the night. She heard the second explosion and felt a spray of softwood- as she went through the window, felt pain slice through her arm, and an immediate dampness pooling in her armpit.

Marcel hauled her to her feet, and they were running, fleeing into the night, toward the fence, while Jack shouted after them and sent two more shots off into the dark. Through the fence-gasping, panting-to the road, mostly empty of cars. There was the dazzle, the wide sweep of headlights. Maggie

recognized Joh Joh's car. Nathaniel suddenly materialized in front of her, backlit, like an evil angel.

'Are you okay?' Her voice was wild, urgent. 'Are you okay?' 'We're okay,' Maggie answered for both.

'Let's go.'

Then they were in the car and moving quickly, bumping over the country roads. For several minutes they were quiet, listening to the distant sound of police sirens. Maggie gritted her teeth every time they hit a rut. She was bleeding.

A piece of glass had sliced the soft skin of her inner arm. She still had the gun. Somehow, it had ended up in her lap. She kept staring at it, bewildered, half in shock.

'Jesus Christ,' Joh Joh finally said when they had put several miles behind them, and the noise of the sirens was lost beneath the quiet shushing of the wind through the trees. 'Holy sh*t. That was crazy.'

Suddenly, the tension broke. Marcel started whooping and Nathaniel began to cry, and Maggie rolled the windows down and laughed like a maniac. She was relieved, grateful, alive sitting in the warm backseat of Joh Joh's car, which smelled like soda cans and old gum.

Joh- John told them about nearly pissing himself when Trigger-Happy Jack came barreling out of the house; he told them that Ray had cracked one of the dogs with a huge rock and sent it whimpering off into the dark. But half the kids never even made it over the fence, and he thought Byron Welcker might have been mauled. It was hard to tell in the dark, with all the chaos. Marcel told them about getting so close to Donahue; he thought for sure he would be shot in the skull. But Donahue was enraged and drunk.

He was not aiming well. 'Thank God,' Marcel said, laughing. Marcel had stolen three items from the kitchen-a butter knife, a saltshaker, and a shot glass shaped like a cowboy boot-to prove they would all been in the house. He gave Nathaniel the shot glass and Maggie the butter knife and kept the saltshaker for himself.

He made Joh Joh pull over and placed the saltshaker on the dashboard, so he could get a good picture of it.

'What are you doing?' Maggie, she asked. Her brain still felt like it was wrapped in a wet blanket. Marcel passed over the phone wordlessly. Maggie saw that Marcel had emailed the photo to judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com, subject line: PROOF. Maggie shivered. She did not like thinking of the mysterious judges- invisible, watching, judging them.

'What about the gun?' Marcel said.

'The gun?' Nathaniel repeated.

'Maggie found it,' Marcel said neutrally.

'Marcel and I found it at the same time,' she said automatically. She did not know why. She could feel Marcel staring at her.

'You should both get credit, then,' Nathaniel said.

'You take the picture, Maggie,' Marcel said. His voice was slightly gentler. 'You send it.' Maggie arranged the shot glass and the gun on her lap, clumsily, with one arm. Her stomach tightened. She wondered if the gun was loaded. Probably. So, weird to have a weapon so close. So-o, weird to see it sitting there.

She had been a year old when her dad shot himself with a gun just like this one. She had a paranoid fear that it might go

off on its own, exploring the night into noise and pain. Once the picture was sent, Joh Joh asked, 'What are you going to do with the gun?'

'Keep it, I guess.' But she did not like the idea of having a gun in her house, waiting, smiling its metal smile.

And what if Lily found it?

'You can't keep it,' he said.

'You stole it.'

'Well, what should I do with it?'

Maggie felt Fear welling inside her.

She had broken into Donahue's house. She had stolen something worth a lot of money. People went to jail for sh*t like that.

Joh Joh sighed. 'Give it to me, Maggie,' he said. 'I'll get rid of it for you.'

She could have hugged him. She could have kissed him. Joh Joh shut the gun in the glove box. Now everyone was quiet. The dashboard clocks glowed green at 1:42.

The roads were all dark except for the adhesive cone that was made by the headlights. The land was dark too, on either side of the houses, trailers, whole streets swallowed up by blackness like they were traveling through an endless tunnel, a place with no boundaries. It started to rain.

Maggie leaned her head against the window. At some point, she must have fallen asleep. She dreamed of falling into the dark, slick throat of an animal, and of trying to cut herself out of its belly with a butter knife, which turned into a gun in her hands and went off.

Part: 2

SATURDAY,

JULY 2

THE NEXT DAY, THE NOTICES WERE EVERYWHERE of us not being round: skip a day it was- were somewhere in Pa- between the wire fences that orange belt that is so deadly, by Clit. Where you will find quite a suburban street some building down the way, that you would call nicer than home, where we are from, they appeared, half-sodden, sunk in the mud in Meth Row, where Jenny would meet up with boys for her needs and a quickie.

She comes down here increasingly- The betting slips blew to the Pines Mobile Park, accepted on the soles of muddy boots, snatched up by the metal underbelly of passing trucks before absconding on the wind, printed on large, glossy sheets of paper, inscribed with the crest of the Pitt-County Police Department, I see jenny doing and running for it with a bag...

Our school had an annulment over the intercom the day before- ANY INDIVIDUALS FOUND TO BE IN WILL BE SUBJECT TO CRIMINAL PROSECUTION as an adult.

Part: 3

MONDAY, JULY 4

Marcel,

THE WEATHER STAYED BEAUTIFUL-FINE AND SUNNY, just hot enough for a whole week after the challenge at Ray's house.

The Fourth of July was no different, and Marcel woke to sunlight washing over his navy-blue blanket, like a slow surf of white. He was happy. He was more than happy. He was

psyched. He was spending time together with Nathaniel today. His mom was home, awake, and making breakfast. He leaned in the doorframe and watched her crack eggs into a pan, break the yolks up with the edge of a wooden spatula.

‘What’s the occasion?’ He spoke. He was still tired, and his neck and back were sore; he had worked two shifts stocking shelves after closing time at the Home Depot in Leeds, where his mom’s ex-boyfriend Danny was a manager. Dumb work, but it paid okay. He had a hundred dollars in his pocket and would be able to buy Nathaniel something at the mall. Her birthday was still a few weeks away- July 29-but still. Might as well get her something small a little early.

‘I could ask you the same thing.’ She let the eggs sizzle away and came over to him and gave him a big smack on the cheek before he could pull away.

‘Why are you up so early?’

He could see traces of makeup. So...?

She had been on a date last night. No wonder she was in a good mood.

‘Didn’t feel like sleeping anymore,’ he said cautiously. He wondered whether his mom would admit to going out. Sometimes she did if a date had gone well.

‘Just in time for eggs. Do you want eggs? Are you hungry? I am making some eggs for Dayna.’ She shook the scrambled eggs onto a plate. They were perfectly scrambled, trembling with butter. Before he could answer, she lowered her voice and said, ‘You know all that therapy Dayna’s been doing?’

Well, Bill says-’

‘Bill?’ Marcel cut in. His mom blushed. Busted. ‘He’s just a friend, Marcel.’

Marcel doubted it, but he said nothing.

His mom went on, in a rush: ‘He took me out to Lea’s in Judson last night. Nice tablecloths and everything. He drinks wine, Marcel. Do you believe that?’ She shook her head, amazed.

‘And he knows someone, some doctor at Columbia Memorial who works with people like Day. Bill says Dayna’s got to go more regularly, like every day.’

‘We can’t-,’ Marcel started to say, but his mom understood and finished for him.

‘I told him we could not afford it. But he said he could get us in, even with no insurance. Can you believe it? At the hospital.’

Marcel said nothing. They had gotten their hopes up the before-new doctor, new treatment, someone who could help. And something always went wrong. A pipe burst and the emergency fund would dry up replacing it, or the doctor would be a quack. The one time they had managed to see someone in a real hospital, he had looked at Dayna for five minutes, done nerve tests, banged on her knee and squeezed her toes, and straightened up.

‘Impossible,’ he had said, sounding angry, like he was mad at them for wasting his time. ‘Car accident, right?’

My advice is: to apply for a better chair. No reason she should be wheeling around in this piece of junk.’ And he had toed the wheelchair, the five-hundred-dollar wheelchair Marcel had busted his ass for whole autumn trying to purchase, while

his mom cried, while Dayna lay curled up every night on her bed, fetal, vacant.

‘So, you want eggs or not?’ His mom said.

Marcel shook his head. ‘Not hungry.’ He picked up Dayna’s plate, grabbed a fork, and carried both into the living room. She had her head sticking out of the open window, and as he entered, he heard her shout, ‘In your dreams!’ and then a burst of laughter from below.

‘What’s that about?’ He asked her.

She snapped around to face him.

Her face went red. ‘Just Ricky, talking stupid,’ she said and took the plate from him. Ricky worked in the kitchen at Dot’s, and he was always sending gifts up to Dayna—cheap flowers, purchased at the gas station, little teddy bear figurines. Ricky was all right.

‘Why are you staring at me?’ Dayna demanded.

‘Not starring,’ Marcel said. He sat next to her and pulled her feet into his lap, began working her calves with his knuckles, as he always did. So, she could walk again. So, she would keep believing it. Dayna ate quickly, eyes on her plate. She was avoiding him. Finally, her mouth crooked into a smile. ‘Ricky said he wants to marry me.’

‘Maybe you should,’ Marcel said.

Dayna shook her head. ‘Freak.’

She reached out and punched Marcel’s shoulder, and he pretended it had hurt.

He was overwhelmed, momentarily, with happiness.

It was going to be a good day.

He showered and dressed carefully -he had even remembered to put his jeans in the wash, so they looked good, crisp, and clean and took the bus to Nathaniel's neighborhood.

It was only ten thirty, but the sun was already high, hovering in the sky like a single eye. As soon as Marcel turned onto Nathaniel's Street, he felt like he was stepping onto a TV set like he was in one of those shows from the 1950s where someone was always washing a car in the driveway and the women wore aprons and said hello to the mailmen. Except there was no movement here, no voices, no people hauling trash or banging doors. It was too quiet. That was one thing about living in the back of Dot's: someone was always yelling about something. It was comforting, in a way, like a reminder that you were not all alone in having problems.

Nathaniel was waiting on her front stoop.

Marcel's stomach bottomed out as soon as he saw her. Her hair was fixed low, in a side ponytail, and she was wearing a ruffled yellow jumper-type thing, with the shirt and shorts attached, that would have looked stupid on anyone else. But on her, it looked amazing, like she was a life-size, exotic Popsicle.

He could not help but think that whenever she had to use the bathroom, she would have to get undressed. She stood up, waving at him, as though he could miss her, wobbling slightly on large wedge heels.

She was not wearing her ankle brace anymore, even though he knew she had screwed her ankle up again running away from Donahue's house. But she winced slightly when she walked.

'Joh- John, and Maggie went to get iced coffees,' she said as he approached her, doing his best not to walk too quickly. 'I told them to get us some too. Do you drink coffee?'

‘I’d shoot coffee if I could,’ he said, and she laughed. The sound made him warm all over, even though he still felt a weird, prickling discomfort standing on her property like he was in a One-of-These-Things-Doesn’t-Belong drawing. A curtain twitched in a ground-floor window, and a face appeared and disappeared too rapidly for Marcel to make out.

‘Someone’s spying on us,’ he said. ‘Probably my dad.’ Nathaniel waved dismissively. ‘Do not worry. He is harmless.’

Marcel wondered what it would be like to have a dad like that in the house, so taken-for-granted you could dismiss him with a wave of your hand. Dayna’s dad, Tom, had been married to Marcel’s mom-only for eighteen months, and only because Marcel’s mom got pregnant, but still. Her dad sent emails to her regularly, and money every month, and sometimes even came for a visit. Marcel had never heard a word from his father, not a single peep. All he knew was his dad worked construction and came from the Dominican Republic. He wondered, for just a split second, what his father was doing now. He was alive and well, back in Florida.

He had finally settled down and had a whole host of little kids running around, with dark eyes like Marcel’s, with the same high cheekbones.

Or even better, he had taken a big-ass tumble from a tall scaffold and split open his head.

When Joh Joh and Maggie returned in another one of Joh- John’s Junkers- which rattled and shook so badly, Marcel was sure it would quit on them before they reached the mall- Marcel helped Nathaniel to the back and opened the door for her.

‘You’re so sweet, Marcel,’ she said, and kissed his cheek, looking almost regretful.

The ride to Kingston was good. Marcel tried to pay Joh Joh back for the iced coffee, but Joh- John waved him off. Maggie managed to coax a decent station out of the patchy radio, and they listened to Johnny Cash until Nathaniel begged for something that had been recorded in this century. Nathaniel made Marcel do magic tricks again, and this time she laughed when he made a straw materialize from her hair.

The car smelled like old tobacco and mint, like an old man's underwear drawer, and the sun came through the windows, and the whole state of New York seemed lit up by a special, interior glow. Marcel felt, for the first time since moving to Carp, for the first time in his life, as if he belonged somewhere. He wondered how different the past few years would have been if he had been spending time together with Joh- John, and Maggie if he had been dating Nathaniel, picking her up to drive her to the movies on Fridays, dancing with her in the gym at homecoming.

He fought down a wave of sadness.

None of it would last. It could not.

Marcel had driven past the Hudson Valley Mall in Kingston but had never gone inside it. The ceiling was fitted with big skylights, which made the spotless linoleum floors seem to glow. The air smelled like body spray and the little bags of potpourri his mom put in her underwear drawer.

But mostly, it smelled like bleach. Everything was white, like a hospital, like the whole building had been dunked in Clorox. It was still early, and the crowds were thin. Marcel's cowboy boots echoed loudly on the ground when he walked, and he hoped Nathaniel would not find it annoying.

Once inside, Nathaniel consulted a small flyer she had pulled from her bag and announced that she would meet up

with the group in an hour or so, outside the Taco Bell in the food court.

‘You’re leaving?’ Marcel blurted out.

Nathaniel looked at Maggie for help.

Maggie jumped in: ‘Nathaniel has an audition.’

‘An audition for what?’ Marcel asked. He wished he did not sound so upset. Immediately, Nathaniel began to blush.

‘You’re going to make fun of me,’ she said. His heart practically ripped open. Like he, Marcel Mason, would ever dream of making fun of Natalie Dalcas.

‘I won’t,’ he said quietly. Joh- John and Maggie were already wandering off. Joh- John pretended to shove Maggie into the fountain. She yelped and walloped him with a fist. Wordlessly, Nathaniel passed him the flyer. It was badly designed. The font was illegible.

WANTED: MODELS AND ACTRESSES TO SHOWCASE THE
BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST AT DAZZLING GEMS!

COMMERCIAL AUDITIONS: 11:30 A.M. SATURDAY AT
THE HUDSON VALLEY MALL.

I MUST BE EIGHTEEN OR OLDER.

‘Your birthday is on the twenty-ninth, right?’ Marcel said, hoping he might get extra points for remembering.

‘So? That is only three weeks away,’ Nathaniel said, and he remembered she was one of the youngest in their graduating class. He passed her the flyer, and she shoved it back into her bag as though she was embarrassed to have shown him. ‘I thought I’d try, anyway.’

You are beautiful, Natalie, he wanted to say to her. But all he could say was, 'They'd be morons to take anyone else.'

She smiled so widely, he could see all her perfect teeth, nestled in her perfect mouth, like small white candies. He was hoping she might kiss his cheek again, but she did not. 'It won't take more than an hour or two,' she said. 'Probably less.' Then she was gone.

Marcel was left in a foul mood. He wandered behind Joh- John, and Maggie for a while, but even though both were perfectly nice, it was clear they wanted to be alone. They had their language, their jokes. They were constantly touching each other too- pushing and shoving, pinching, and hugging, like kids flirting on a playground. Jesus. Marcel did not know why they just did not get it on already.

They were crazy about each other.

He made an excuse about wanting to get something for his sister-Joh- John looked vaguely surprised he even had a sister-and wandered outside, smoking three cigarettes in a row in the parking lot, which was beginning to fill up. He checked his phone a few times, hoping Nathaniel had already texted. She had not. He began to feel like an idiot. He had all this money on him. He had been planning to buy her something. But this was not a date.

Was it?

What did she want from him? He could not tell. Inside, he wandered around aimlessly. The mall was not that big-only on the floor-and there was no carousel, which disappointed him. One time he had taken a carousel ride with Dayna at a mall in Columbus-or was it- Chicago?

They had raced around, trying to ride every single horse before the music stopped playing, yelling like cowboys. The memory made him happy and sad at the same time. It took him a moment to realize he had accidentally stepped in front of a Victoria's Secret.

A mom and her daughter were giving him weird looks. He looked like a perv. He turned away quickly, resolving to go to Dazzling Gems and see whether Nathaniel was done yet. It had been an hour, anyway.

Dazzling Gems was on the other side of the building. He was surprised to see an extensive line snaking out of the boutique girls waiting to audition, all of them tanned and wearing next to nothing and perching like antelope on towering heels, and none of them close to as as as Nathaniel. They were all cheesy looking, he thought. Then he saw her.

She was standing just outside the boutique doors, talking to an old person with a face that reminded Marcel of a ferret. His hair was greasy and thinning on top; Marcel could see patchy bits of his scalp. He was wearing a cheap suit, and even this, somehow, managed to look greasy and threadbare. At that second, Nathaniel turned and spotted Marcel. She smiled big, waving, and pushed toward him. Ferret melted into the crowd.

'How was it?' Marcel asked.

'Stupid,' she said. 'I did not even make it through the doors. I waited in line for, like, an hour and barely moved three places. And then some woman came around and checked IDs.' She said it cheerfully, though.

'So, who was that?' Marcel asked carefully. He did not want her to think he was jealous of Ferret, even though he sort of was...

‘Who?’ Nathaniel blinked.

‘That guy you were just talking to,’ he said. Marcel noticed Nathaniel was holding something... a business card.

‘Oh, that.’ Nathaniel rolled her eyes. ‘Some modeling scouts. He said he liked my look.’ She said it casually like it was no big deal, but he could tell she was thrilled.

‘So-o he just, like, goes around handing out cards?’ Marcel said.

He could tell right away he had offended her. ‘He doesn’t just hand them out to anyone,’ she said stiffly. ‘He handed one to me. Because he liked my face. Gisele was discovered in a mall.’

Marcel did not think Ferret looked anything like a modeling agent-and why would an agent be scouting at the mall in Kingston, New York, anyway? -But he did not know how to say so without offending her further. He did not want her to think he thought she was not pretty enough to be a model because he was. Except for tall models and she was short. But otherwise.

‘Be careful,’ he said because he could think of nothing else to say.

To his relief, she laughed. ‘I know what I’m doing,’ she said.

‘Come on. Let us get something to eat. I am starving.’ Nathaniel did not like to hold hands because it made her feel ‘imbalanced,’ but she walked so close to him, their arms were almost touching. It occurred to him that anyone looking would assume they were together, like boyfriend-girlfriend, and he had a sudden rush of insane happiness. He had no idea how this had happened because he was walking next to Nathaniel Dalcas

as he belonged there like she was his girl. He thought, vaguely, it had something to do with Terror. They found Joh- John, and Maggie arguing about whether to go to Sbarro or East Wok. While they hashed it out,

Marcel and Nathaniel agreed easily on Subway. He bought her lunch-a chicken sub, which she changed at the last second to a salad ('Just in case,' she said cryptically)-and a Diet Coke. They found an empty table and sat down while Maggie and Joh- John stood in line at Taco Bell, which they had at last agreed on.

'So, what's up with them?' Marcel said.

'With Joh- John and Maggie?' Nathaniel shrugged. 'Best friends, I guess.' She slurped her soda loudly. He liked the way she ate unselfconsciously, unlike some girls. 'I think Joh- John has a crush on her, though.'

'Seems like it,' Marcel said.

Nathaniel tilted her head, watching him.

'What about you?' 'What about me what?'

'Do you have a crush on anyone?' He had just taken a big bite of his sandwich; the question was so unexpected he nearly choked. He could not think of a single thing to say that was not lame.

'I'm not -' He coughed and took a sip of his Coke. Jesus. His face was burning.

'I mean, I don't'- 'Marcel.' She cut him off. Her voice was suddenly stern. 'I'd like you to kiss me now.' He had just been scarfing a meatball sub. But he kissed her anyway. What else could he do?

He felt the noise in his head, the noise around them, swelling into a clamor; he loved the way she kissed like she was still hungry like she wanted to eat him. Heat roared through his whole body, and for one second, he experienced a crazy shock of anxiety: he must be dreaming. He put one hand on the back of her head, and she pulled away just long enough to say, 'Both hands, please.'

After that, the noise in his head quieted. He felt relaxed, and he kissed her again, more slowly this time. On the way home, he barely said anything. He was happier than he had ever been, and he feared saying or doing anything that would ruin it.

Joh- John dropped Marcel off first. Marcel had promised to watch fireworks on TV with Dayna tonight. He wondered whether he should kiss Nathaniel again-he was stressing about it-but she solved the problem by hugging him, which would have been disappointing except she was pressed up next to him in the car and he could feel her boobs against his chest.

'Thanks a lot, man,' he said to Joh- John. Joh- John gave him a fist bump.

Like they were friends.

They were. He watched the car drive off, even after he could no longer make out Nathaniel's silhouette in the backseat until the car disappeared beyond a hill and he could hear only the distant, guttural growl of the engine. Still, he stood there on the sidewalk, reluctant to head inside, back to Dayna and his mom and the narrow space of his room, piled with clothes and empty cigarette packs, smelling vaguely like garbage.

He just wanted to be happy for a little longer.

His phone buzzed. An email. His heart picked up. He recognized the sender.

Luke Hanrahan.

The message was short.

Leave us alone. I will go to the police.

Marcel read the message several times, enjoying it, reading desperation between the lines. He had been wondering whether Luke had received his message; he had. Marcel scrolled down and reread the email he had sent a week earlier.

The best is in.

The game is on.

Part: 4

I will make you a trade:

A sister's legs for a brother's life.

Standing in the fading sun, Marcel allowed himself to smile.

Maggie,

IT HAD BEEN A GOOD DAY-ONE OF THE BEST OF THE whole summer so far. For once, Maggie would not let herself think about the future, and what would happen in the fall, when Joh- John went to college at SUNY Binghamton and Nathaniel headed to Los Angeles to be an actress. Maggie thought she could just stay on at Anne's house, as a kind of helper. She could even move in. Lily could come too; they could share a room in one of the sheds.

Of course, that meant she would still be stuck in Carp, but at least she would be out of Fresh Pines Mobile Park. She liked Anne, and she especially liked the animals. She had been out to Mansfield Road three times a week, and she was already looking forward to heading back. She liked the smell of wet

straw and old leather and grass that hung over everything; she liked the way the dog Muppet recognized her, and the excited chattering of the chickens. She decided she liked the white Bengal's, too-from a distance, anyway.

She was mesmerized they moved, muscles rippling like the surface of the water, and by their eyes, which looked so wise-so bleak, too, as though they had stared into the center of the universe and found it disappointing, a feeling Maggie completely understood. But she was happy to let Anne do the feeding. She could not believe the balls on the woman. It was a good thing Anne was too old for Fear. She would have nailed it.

Anne went inside the pen, got within three feet of the white Bengal's as they circled her, eyeing the bucket of meat hungrily-although Maggie was sure they would be just as happy to take a chomp of Anne's head.

Anne insisted they would not harm her, though. 'As long as I'm doing the feeding,' she said, 'they won't use me for feeding.' Just maybe things would be okay. The only bad part of the day was the fact that Joh- John was constantly checking his phone, Maggie assumed for texts from Avery. This reminded her that Matt had not texted her once since their breakup. Meanwhile, Joh- John had Avery (Maggie would not think of her as a girlfriend,) and Nathaniel had Marcel hanging on her every word and was also still seeing a bartender over in Kingston, some sleazy guy who rode a Vespa, which Nathaniel insisted was just as cool as a motorcycle.

Right...?

But after they dropped off Marcel, Nathaniel asked, 'Is Avery coming tonight, Joh- John?' and when Joh- John said no, too quickly, Maggie felt at peace with the world. Nathaniel made them detour so she could get a six-pack; then they headed to 7- Eleven and bought junky Fourth of July food:

Doritos and dip, powdered doughnuts, and even a bag of pork cracklings, because it was funny and Joh- John had bravely volunteered to eat some.

They headed to the gully: a steep, barren slope of gravel and broken-up concrete that bottomed out in the old train tracks, now red with rust and littered with trash. The sun was just starting to set. They picked their way carefully down the slope and across the tracks, and Joh- John scouted the best place to light off the sparklers.

This was a tradition. Two years ago, Joh- John had even surprised Maggie by buying two fifty-pound bags of mixed sand from Home Depot and making a beach. He had even bought loopy straws and those paper umbrellas to put in their drinks, so she would feel they were somewhere tropical.

Today, Maggie would not have chosen to be anywhere else in the entire world. Not even the Caribbean. Nathaniel was already on her second beer, and she was getting wobbly. Maggie had a beer too, and even though she did not usually like to drink, she felt warm and happy. She stumbled over a loose slat in the tracks and Joh- John caught her, looped an arm around her waist. She was surprised that he felt so solid, so strong. So warm, too.

‘You okay there, Heath-bar?’ When he smiled, both of his dimples appeared, and Maggie had the craziest thought: she wanted to kiss them. She banished the idea quickly. That was why she did not drink.’

‘I am fine.’ She tried to pull away. He moved his arm to her shoulders. She could smell beer on his breath. She wondered if he, too, was a little drunk.

‘Come on, get off me.’ She said it jokingly, but she did not feel like joking. Nathaniel was wandering up ahead of them,

kicking stones. Darkness was falling, and her heart was beating hard in her chest and for a moment, she felt like she and Joh- John was alone. He was staring at her with an expression she could not identify. She felt heat spreading through her stomach- she was nervous for no reason.

‘Take a picture. It will last longer,’ she said and gave him a push. The moment passed. Joh- John laughed and charged; she Marcel him.

‘Children, children. Stop fighting!’ Nathaniel called back to them. They found a place to set off the sparklers. Nathaniel’s fizzled and sputtered out before they could get properly lit. Maggie tried next. When she stepped forward with the lighter, there was a series of cracking sounds, and Maggie jumped back, thinking confusedly she had messed up. But then she realized that she had not even gotten the sparkler lit.

‘Look, look!’ Nathaniel was bouncing up and down excitedly. Maggie turned just as a series of fireworks-green, red, a shower of golden sparks exploded in the east, just above the treeline. Nathaniel was laughing like a maniac.

‘What the hell?’ Maggie felt dizzy with happiness and confusion. It was not even dark all the way yet, and there were never any fireworks in Carp. The nearest fireworks were in Poughkeepsie, fifty minutes away, at Wary as Park- where Lily would be with their mom and Bo right now.

Only Joh- John did not seem excited. His arms were a-crossed, and he was shaking his head as they kept going: more gold, and now blue and red again, blooming and fading, sucked back into the sky, leaving tentacle-traces of smoke. And just as Nathaniel started running, half limping but still laughing, calling,

‘Come on, come on!’ like they could race straight through to the source, it hit Maggie too: this was not a celebration.

It was a sign. In the distance, sirens began to wail. The show stopped abruptly: ghostly fingers of smoke crept silently across the sky. At last, Nathaniel stopped running. Whipping around to face Maggie and Joh- John, she said, ‘What?

What is it?’ Maggie shivered, even though it was not cold. The air smelled like smoke, and the wail of the fire trucks cut through her head, sharp and hot.

‘It’s the next challenge,’ she said.

‘It’s Fright.’

It was just after eleven p.m. by the time Joh- John dropped Maggie off in front of the trailer. Now she wished she had not had the beer-she felt exhausted. Joh- John had been quiet since Natalie got out of the car.

Now he turned to her and said, abruptly, ‘I still think you should quit; you know.’

Maggie pretended not to know what he was talking about. ‘Quit what?’

‘Don’t play dumb.’ Joh- John rubbed his forehead. The light shining into the car from the porch lit up his profile: the straight slope of his nose, the set of his jaw. Maggie realized that he was not a boy anymore. Somehow, when she was not looking, he had become a guy -tall and strong, with a stubborn chin and a girlfriend and opinions she did not share. She felt an ache in her stomach, a sense of loss, and a sense of wanting.

‘The game’s just going to get more dangerous, Maggie. I do not want you to get hurt. I would never forgive myself if -’ He

trailed off, shaking his head. Maggie thought of that awful text message she had received. Quit now, before you get hurt. Anger sparked in her chest. Why was everyone trying to make sure she did not compete?

‘I thought you were rooting for me.’

‘I am.’ Joh- John turned to face her. They were awfully close together in the dark. ‘Just not like that.’ For a second, they continued staring at each other. His eyes were dark moons. His lips were a few inches away from hers. Maggie realized that she was still thinking about kissing him.

‘Good night, Joh- John,’ she said and got out of the car.

Inside, the TV was on. Krista and Bo were lying on the couch, watching an old black-and-white movie. Bo was shirtless, and Krista was smoking. The coffee table was packed with empty beer bottles-Maggie counted ten of them.

‘Hey, Maggie Lynn.’ Krista stubbed out her cigarette. She missed the ashtray on her first try. She was glassy-eyed.

Maggie could barely look at her. She better not have been messed up and driving with Lily in the car; Maggie would kill her. ‘Where have you been?’ ‘Nowhere,’ Maggie said. She knew her mom did not care. ‘Where’s Lily?’

‘Sleeping.’ Krista stuck her hand down her shirt, scratching. She kept her eyes on the TV. ‘Big day. We saw fireworks.’

‘Piss-packed with people,’ Bo put in. ‘There was a line for the goddamn porta-potties.’

‘I’m going to sleep,’ Maggie said.

She did not bother trying to be nice.

Krista was too drunk to lecture her.

‘Keep the TV down, okay?’

She had trouble getting the door to the bedroom open; she realized that Lily had balled up one of her sweatshirts and shoved it in the crack between the door and the warped floorboards, to help keep out the noise and the smoke. Maggie had taught her that trick. It was hot in the room, even though the window was open, and a small portable fan was whirring rhythmically on the dresser.

She did not turn on the light. There was a little moonlight coming through the window, and she could have navigated the room by touch, anyway. She undressed, piling her clothes on the floor, and climbed into bed, pushing her blankets to the footboard, using only the sheet as a cover. She had assumed Lily was sleeping, but suddenly she heard rustling from the other twin bed.

‘Maggie?’ She whispered. ‘Uh-huh?’

‘Can you tell me a story?’

‘What kind of story?’

‘A happy kind.’ It had been a long time since Lily had asked for a story. Now Maggie told a version of one of her favorites, ‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses,’ except instead of princesses, she made the girls normal sisters, who lived in a falling-down castle with a queen and king too vain and stupid to look after them. But then they found a trapdoor that led down to a secret world, where they were princesses, and where everyone fawned over them.

By the time she was done, Lily was breathing slowly, deeply. Maggie rolled over and closed her eyes.

Part: 5

‘Maggie?’

Lily’s voice was thick with sleep. Maggie opened her eyes again, surprised.

‘You should be sleeping, Billy.’

‘Are you going to die?’

The question was so unexpected, Maggie did not answer for a few seconds. ‘Of course not, Lily,’ she said sharply.

Lily’s face was half-mashed into her pillow. ‘Kyla Anderson says you are going to die. Because of Terror.’

Maggie felt a current of fear go through her fear, and something else, something deeper and more painful.

‘How did you hear about Terror?’ She asked. Lily mumbled something. Maggie prompted her again.

‘Who told you about Fear, Lily?’ she asked.

But Lily was asleep.

The Graybill house was haunted.

Everyone in Carp knew it and had been saying it for half a century, since the last of the Graybill’s had hanged himself from its rafters, just like his father and grandfather before him.

The Graybill curse. No one had lived in the house officially for more than forty years, although infrequently some squatters and runaways risked it.

No one would live there. At night, lights flickered on and off in the windows.

Vocal sounds whispered in the mouse-infested walls, and ghosts of children ran down dust-covered hallways. Sometimes, locals claimed they heard a woman earsplitting screaming in the attic.

Those were the rumors, at least. And now, the fireworks: some of the old-timers, the ones who claimed they could still recollect the day the last Graybill was found swinging by the neck, swore that the fireworks were not set off by kids at all.

They might not even be fireworks. Who knew what sort of forces leached out of that tumbledown house, what bad juju, sizzling the night into fire and flame?

The police officers thought it was just the usual Fourth of July prank. But Maggie, Nathaniel, and Marcel knew better. So did Kim Hollister and Ray Hanrahan and all the other players. Two days after the Fourth of July, their suspicions were confirmed.

Maggie had just gotten out of the shower when she booted on the ancient laptop and checked her email. Her throat went dry; her mouth turned itchy.
Judmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

Subject: Enjoy fireworks? The show will be even better this Friday at ten p.m.

See how long you can stand it.

Remember no calling for help.

FRIDAY, JULY 8

Maggie,

'IT'S TOO EASY,' MAGGIE SAID AGAIN. SHE SQUEEZED the steering wheel. She did not like to drive.

But Joh- John had been insistent. He was not going to make it to the challenge today, was not going to sit around and wait for hours while the players tried to outlast one another in a haunted house.

And for once, she had been able to use the car. Her mom and Bo were getting smashed with some friends in Lot 62, an abandoned trailer mostly used for partying. They would crawl home around four, or not until sunrise.

‘They’ll probably try and screw with us,’ Nathaniel said. ‘They’ve probably rigged the whole house with sound effects and lights.’

‘It’s still too easy.’ Maggie shook her head. ‘This is Fright, not Halloween.’ Her palms were sweating.

‘Reminisces about the time we were kids, and Joh- John dared you to stand on the porch for three minutes?’

‘Only because you flaked,’ Nathaniel said.

‘You flaked too,’ Maggie reminded her, sorry now that she had brought it up. ‘You didn’t make it for thirty seconds.’ ‘Joh- John did, though,’ Nathaniel said, turning her face to the window. ‘He went inside, remember? He stayed inside for five whole minutes.’

‘I forgot about that,’ Maggie said.

‘When was that?’ Marcel spoke up unexpectedly.

‘Years ago. We must have been ten, eleven. Right, Maggie?’

‘Younger, Nine,’ Maggie wished that Joh- John had come.

This was their first challenge without him, and her chest ached. Being with Joh- John made her feel safe.

They turned the bend, and the house became visible: the sharp peak of its roof silhouetted against the clouds knotted on the horizon, like something out of a horror movie. It rose crookedly out of the ground, and Maggie imagined even from a distance she could hear the wind howling through the holes in the roof, the mice nibbling on the rotten wood floors.

The only thing missing was a flock of bats. There were a dozen cars parked on the road. Most people felt the same way Joh- John did, and most of the spectators had stayed home. Not all of them, though.

Maggie spotted Vivian Trevin, sitting on the hood of her car, smoking a cigarette. A group of juniors huddled not far off, passing around a shared bottle of wine, looking solemn, as if they were attending a wake. For a second, before Maggie turned the engine off, the rain misting through the headlights reminded her of thin slivers of glass.

Marcel climbed out of the car and opened the door for Nathaniel. Maggie reached for the bag she had packed for the night: food, water, a big blanket. She would be here for as long as it took to win. Nathaniel and Marcel, too.

Suddenly there was a muffled shout from outside. Maggie looked up in time to see a dark-shaped rocket past the car. Nathaniel screamed. And people were suddenly rushing into the road. Maggie threw herself out of the car and ran around to the passenger side, in time to see Ray Hanrahan catch Marcel in the stomach with a shoulder. Marcel stumbled backward, bumping against the remains of a fence. A shower of wood collapsed behind him.

'I know what you're doing, you little freak,' he spat out.
'You think you can-'

He was cut off and grunted sharply.

Marcel had stepped forward and grabbed Ray by the throat. There was a collective gasp. Nathaniel cried out. Marcel leaned in and spoke quietly into Ray's ear.

Maggie could not hear what he said. Just as quickly, he stepped backward, releasing Ray, who stood, coughing, and gagging in the rain.

Marcel's face was calm. Nathaniel moved as though to hug him and then, at the last second, obviously thought better of it.

'Stay the hell away from me, Mason,' Ray said when he had regained his breath. 'I am warning you. You better watch it.'
'Come on, guys,' Sarah Wilson, another contestant, spoke up. 'It is pouring. Can we get started?' Ray was still glowering at Marcel.

But he said nothing.

'All right.' That was -Digging.

Maggie had not seen him in the crowd.

I love the old Chevy looking at the photos 3 on the tree, yet with newer parts... I find that cool.

His voice was suctioned away by the darkness and the rain. 'Rules are simple. The longer you make it in the house, the higher your score.' Maggie shivered. The night of the jump, when -Digging was crowing into the megaphone, seemed like it had happened years ago: the radio, the beer, the celebration.

She suddenly could not remember how she had ended up here in front of the Graybill house, all its angles and planes wrong. A deformed place. Listing to one side as though it was in danger of collapse.

‘No calling for help,’ -Digging said, and his voice cracked a little. Maggie wondered whether he knew something they did not. ‘That is, it. Challenge is on.’

Everyone broke apart. Beams of light flashlights and the occasional blue glow of a cell phone-swept across the road illuminated the crooked fence, the tall grass, the remains of a front path, now choked with weeds. Marcel was pulling his backpack out of the trunk. Nathaniel was standing next to him. Maggie pushed her way over to them.

‘What was that about?’ Maggie asked. Marcel slammed the trunk closed.

‘No idea,’ he said. In the dark, it was hard to decipher his expression. Maggie wondered whether he knew more than he was telling.

‘The guy’s a psychopath.’ Maggie shivered again as moisture seeped under the collar of her jacket, dampening her sweatshirt.

She knew, like everyone did, that Marcel’s older sister had gone up against Ray’s older brother two years ago in Joust and been paralyzed. Maggie had not been watching -she had been babysitting Lily that night with Joh- John.

But Nat had said the car folded up like an accordion. Maggie wondered if Marcel blamed Hanrahan's. ‘Let’s stay away from Ray inside, okay?’ She spoke.

‘Let’s stay away from all of them.’ She did not put it past Ray Hanrahan to sabotage them- jump out at them, grab them,

or take a swing. Marcel turned to her and smiled. His teeth were very white, even in the dark.

‘Deal.’ They trudged across the road and into the yard with the others. Maggie’s chest was heavy with something that was not fear, exactly more like dread. It was too easy.

The rain made the mud suck at her shoes. It would be a sh*t night. She wished she had thought to try and sneak a beer. She did not even like the taste, but that would take the edge off, make the night go quicker.

She wondered whether the judges were here maybe sitting in the front seat of one of the darkened cars, legs on the dash; or even standing in the road, jogging up and down, pretending to be normal spectators.

That was the part of Fear she hated most of all: the fact that they were always being watched. They were on the front porch too quickly. Even Seller had just disappeared inside, and the door swung shut with a bang.

Nathaniel jumped...

‘You, okay?’

Marcel asked her, in a deep voice.

‘Fine,’ Nat spoke too loudly. Once again, Maggie wished Joh- John had come along. She wished he were next to her, making stupid jokes, teasing her about being afraid.

‘Here goes nothing.’ Nathaniel took a step forward and heaved open the door, which was hanging at a weird angle. She hesitated... ‘It smells,’ she said. ‘As long as it doesn’t shoot or bark, I’m fine with it,’ Marcel said.

He did not seem afraid at all. He moved forward, in front of Nat, and stepped into the house. Nathaniel followed. Maggie was the last to enter.

Immediately, Maggie smelled it too: mouse sh*t and mildew, rot, like the smell of a mouth closed for years. Jagged beams of light zigzagged across the halls and through dark rooms, as the other players slowly spread out, trying to stake out their corners, their hiding spots.

Floorboards creaked, and doors moaned open and closed; voices whispered in the dark. The blackness was as thick and heavy as soup. Maggie felt her stomach pooling, open with fear.

She fumbled into her pocket for her phone. Nathaniel had the same idea. Nathaniel's face was suddenly visible, lit up from underneath, her eyes deep hollows, her skin blue-tinged. Maggie used the feeble light from her phone to cast a small circle on the faded wallpaper, the termite-eaten molding.

Suddenly a bright light flashed on.

'Flashlight app,' Marcel said, as Maggie brought a hand to her eyes.

'Sorry. I did not know it would be so strong.'

He directed the beam upward, to the ceiling, where the remains of a chandelier were swinging, creaking, in a faint wind. That was where three Graybill men had hanged themselves if the rumors were true.

'Come on,' Maggie said, trying to keep her voice steady. The judges might be anywhere. 'Let's move away from the door.' They advanced farther into the house. Marcel took the lead. Footsteps rang out above them, on the second floor.

Marcel's flashlight cut a small, sharp blade through the blackness, and Maggie was reminded of a documentary about the wreck of the Titanic she had watched once with Lily—the way the recovery submarines had looked, floating through all that dark space, crawling over the ruined wood and the old china plates, which were covered with mossy growth and underwater things. That was how she felt.

As if they were at the bottom of the ocean. The pressure on her chest was squeezing, squeezing. She could hear Nathaniel breathing hard. From upstairs came muffled sounds of shouting: a fight.

'Kitchen,' Marcel announced. He swept the beam of light across the rust pitted stove, a tile floor half ripped up.

All the images were disjointed, bleached white, like in a bad horror film. Maggie pictured insects everywhere, spider webs, horrible things dropping on her from above. Marcel aimed his beam in the corner and Maggie almost screamed: for a second, she saw a face-black, pitted eyes, mouth leering.

'Can you stop pointing that thing at me?'

The girl raised her hand in front of her eyes, squinting, and Maggie's heartbeat slowed. It was just Sarah Wilson, huddled in the corner. As Marcel angled the light down, Maggie saw that Sarah had brought a pillow and a sleeping bag. It would be easier, far easier, if all the players could huddle together in one room, passing Cheetos and a bottle of cheap vodka someone had stolen from a parent's liquor cabinet.

But they were beyond that. They passed out of the kitchen and down a short set of stairs, littered with trash, all of it lit up in starts and jerks: cigarette butts, brittle leaves, blackened Styrofoam coffee cups. Squatters. Maggie heard

footsteps: on the walls, overhead, behind her. She could not tell.

'Maggie'-Nathaniel turned around, grabbed Maggie's sweatshirt.

'Sh-h-h-h,' Marcel hushed them sharply. He shut off the flashlight. They stood in darkness so heavy; Maggie could taste it every time she inhaled: things moldering, rotting slowly; slippery, sliding, slithery things. Behind her. The footsteps stopped, hesitant. Floorboards creaked.

Someone was following them.

'Move,' Maggie whispered. She knew she was losing it, that it was just another player exploring the house, but she could not stop a terrible fantasy that seized her: it was one of the judges, pacing slowly through the dark, ready to grab her.

And not a human, either-a supernatural being with a thousand eyes and long, slick fingers, a jaw that would come unhinged, a mouth big enough to swallow you. The footsteps advanced. One more step, and then another.

'Move,' she said again. Her voice sounded strangled, desperate in the dark.

'In here,' Marcel said. It was so dark, she could not even see him, though he must have been standing only a few feet away. He grunted; she heard the groaning of old wood, the whine of rusted hinges. She felt Nathaniel move away from her and she followed blindly, quickly, nearly tripping over an irregularity in the floor, which marked the beginning of a new room.

Marcel swung the door closed behind her, leaning into it until it popped into place. Maggie stood, panting.

The footsteps kept coming. They paused outside the door. Her breath was shallow, as though she had been underwater. Then the footsteps withdrew.

Marcel turned on the flashlight app again. In its glow, his face looked like a weird modern painting: all angles.

‘What was that?’ Maggie whispered. She was almost afraid neither Marcel nor Nat had heard.

But Marcel said, ‘Nothing. Someone trying to freak us out. That is all.’

He placed his phone on the floor, so the beam of light was directed straight up. Marcel had a sleeping bag stuffed in his backpack; Maggie shook out the blanket she had brought. Nathaniel sat down next to the cone of light, drawing the blanket around her shoulders.

Suddenly, relief broke in Maggie’s chest. They were safe, together, around their makeshift version of a campfire. It would be easy.

Marcel squatted next to Nathaniel. ‘Might as well get comfortable, I guess.’ Maggie paced the small room. It must have once been a storage area, or a pantry, except that it was a little way from the kitchen.

It was no more than twenty feet square. High up against one wall was the room’s single window, but the cloud cover was so thick, barely any light penetrated.

On one wall were warped wooden shelves, which now contained nothing but a layer of dust and yet more trash: empty chip bags, a crushed soda can, an old wrench. She used the light of her cell phone to perform a quick exploration.

‘Spiders,’ she commented, as her phone lit up a web, perfectly symmetrical, glistening and silver, which extended between two shelves. Marcel rocketed to his feet as though he had been bitten on the ass.

‘Where?’

Maggie and Nathaniel exchanged a look.

Nathaniel cracked a small smile.

‘You’re afraid of spiders?’

Maggie blurted out. She could not help it. Marcel had shown no fear, ever. She would never have expected it.

‘Keep your voice down,’ he said roughly.

‘Don’t worry,’ Maggie said. She turned off her phone. ‘It was just the web, anyway.’ She did not mention the small, blurred lumps within it: insects, spun into the threads, waiting to be consumed and digested.

Marcel nodded and looked embarrassed. He turned away, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

‘Now what?’ Nathaniel said.

‘We wait,’ Marcel replied, without turning around. Nathaniel reached over and popped open a bag of chips. A second later, she was crunching loudly. Maggie looked at her.

‘What?’ Nathaniel said with her mouth full. ‘We are going to be here all night. Except it came out, ‘we’re going to be crazy and sh*t all night.’

She was right... Maggie went and sat down next to her. The floor was uneven.

‘So, wave do you think it’s right too?’ Nathaniel said, which this time Maggie had no trouble translating.

‘What do I think about what?’ She hugged her knees to her chest. She wished the cone of light were bigger, more powerful. Everything outside its limited beam was rough shadow, shape, and darkness. Even Marcel, standing with his face, turned away from the light.

In the dark, he could have been anyone.

‘I do not know. Everything. The judges. Who plans all this?’

Maggie reached out and took two chips. She fed them into her mouth, one from each hand. It was an unstated rule that no one spoke about the identity of the judges. ‘I want to know how it got started,’ she said.

‘And why we’ve all been crazy enough to play.’ It was meant to be a joke, but her voice came out shrill. Marcel shifted and came to squat next to Natalie again.

‘What about you, Marcel?’ Maggie said. ‘Why did you agree to play?’ Marcel looked up. His face was a mask of hollows, and Maggie was suddenly reminded of one summer when she had gone camping with some other Girl Scouts, the way the counselors had gathered them around the fire to tell ghost stories.

They had used flashlights to turn their faces gruesome, and all the campers were afraid. For a second, she thought he smiled.

‘Revenge.’

Nathaniel started to laugh. ‘Revenge?’ She repeated.

Maggie realized she had not misheard. 'Nat,' she said sharply. Nathaniel must have remembered, then, about

Marcel's sister: her smile faded quickly.

Marcel's eyes clicked on Maggie's. She quickly looked away.

So-o, he did blame Luke Hanrahan for what had happened. She felt suddenly cold. The word revenge was so awful: straight and sharp, like a knife. As if he could tell what she was thinking, Marcel smiled. 'I just want to cream Ray, that's all,' he said lightly, and reached out to grab the bag of chips.

Maggie felt instantly better. They tried to play cards for a while, but it was too dark, even for a slow-moving game; they had to keep passing the flashlight around. Nathaniel wanted to learn how to do a magic trick, but Marcel resisted it.

Occasionally- they heard voices from the hall or footsteps, and Maggie would tense up, certain that this was the beginning of the challenge-spooky ghost holograms or people in masks who would jump out at them. But nothing happened. No one came barging in the door to say boo.

After a while, Maggie got tired. She balled up the duffel bag she had brought under her head. She listened to the low rhythm of Marcel and Nathaniel's conversation; they were talking about whether a shark or a bear would win in a fight, and Marcel was arguing that they had to specify a medium.

...???

Then they were talking about dogs, and Maggie saw two large eyes (a white Bengal's eyes?) the size of headlights, staring at her from the darkness. She wanted to scream; there was a monster here, in the dark, about to pounce. And she

opened her mouth, but instead of a scream coming out, the darkness poured in, and she slept.

Part: 6

Marcel,

Marcel WAS DREAMING OF THE TIME THAT HE AND Dayna had- ridden the carousel together in Chicago. Or Columbus. But in his dream, there were palm trees, and a man selling grilled meats from a brightly colored cart. Dayna was in front of him, and her hair was so long it kept whipping him in the face.

A crowd was gathered: people shouting, leering, calling things they could not understand. He knew he was supposed to be happy he was supposed to be having fun, but he was not. It was too hot.

Plus, there was Dayna's hair, getting tangled in his mouth, making it hard to swallow. Making it hard to breathe. There was the stench from the meat cart, too. The smell of burning. The thick clouds of smoke.

Smoke...

Marcel woke up suddenly, jerking upright. He had fallen asleep straight on the floor, with his face pressed against the cold wood. He had no idea what time it was. He could just make out

Maggie's and Nathaniel's entangled forms, the pattern of their breathing. For a second, still half-asleep, he thought they looked like baby dragons. Then he realized why: the room was filled with smoke. It was seeping underneath the crack below the door, snaking its way into the room.

He stood up, then thought better of it, remembering that smoke rises, and dropped to his knees. There was shouting: screams and footsteps sounded from other parts of the house.

Too easy. He remembered what Maggie had said earlier.

Of course...?

Firecrackers exploded here on the Fourth of July; there would be a prize for the players who stayed in the house the longest.

Fire... The house was on fire. He reached over and shook the girls, not bothering to distinguish between them, to locate their elbows from their shoulders. 'Wake up. Wake up.'

Natalie sat up, rubbing her eyes, and then immediately began coughing.

'What-?'

'Fire,' he said shortly. 'Stay low.'

'Smoke rises.' Maggie was stirring now too. He crawled back to the door. No doubt about it: the rats were leaving a project. There was a confusion of voices outside, the sound of slamming doors.

That meant the fire must have already spread far. No one would have wanted to bail right away. He put his hand on the metal door handle. It was warm to the touch, but not scalding.

'Nathaniel? Marcel? What is going on?' Maggie was fully awake now. Her voice was shrill, hysterical. 'Why is it so smoky?'

‘Fire!!’ It was Natalie who answered. Her voice was, amazingly, calm.

Time to get the hell out. Before the fire spread further. He had a sudden memory of some gym class in DC-or was its Richmond?

-When all the kids had to stop, drop, and roll onto the foot smelling linoleum. Even then, he had known it was stupid. Like rolling would do anything but turn you into a fireball.

He grabbed the handle and pulled, but nothing happened. Tried again. Nothing. For a second, he thought he was still asleep in one of his nightmares, where he tried and tried to run but could not or swung at some assailant’s face and did not even make a mark. On his third try, the handle popped off in his hand. And for the first time in the whole game, he felt it: horror, building in his chest, crawling into his throat.

‘What’s happening?’ Maggie was practically screaming now. ‘Open the door, Marcel.’

‘I can’t.’ His hands and feet felt numb. Fear was squeezing his lungs, making it hard to breathe. No. That was the smoke. Thicker now. He unfroze. He fumbled his fingers into the hole where the door handle had been, tugging frantically, and felt a sharp bite of metal. He jammed his shoulder against the door, feeling increasingly desperate. ‘It’s stuck.’

‘What do you mean, stuck?’ Maggie started to say something else and instead started coughing.

Marcel spun around, dropped into a crouch. ‘Hold on.’ He brought his sleeve to his mouth. ‘Let me think.’ He could no longer hear any footsteps or shouting. Has anyone else got out? He could hear, though, the progress of the fire: the muffled

snapping and popping of old wood, decades of rot and ruin slurped into flame. Maggie was fumbling with her phone.

‘What are you doing?’ Nathaniel tried to swat at it.

‘The rules said no calling for.’

‘The rules?’

Maggie cut her off.

‘Are you crazy?’ She punched furiously at the keyboard. Her face was wild, contorted, like a wax mask that had started to melt. She let out a sound that was a cross between a scream and a sob. ‘It is not working. There is no service.’

Think, think. Through the dread, Marcel carved a clear path in his mind. A goal: he needed a goal. He knew instinctively that it was his job to get the girls out safely, just like it was his job to make sure nothing bad ever happened to Dayna, his Dayna, his only sister, and best friend.

He could not fail again. No matter what. The window was too high-he would never reach it. And it was so narrow... But he could give Natalie a boost... She might be able to fit. Then what? It did not matter. Maggie might be able to squeeze through too, although he doubted it.

‘Nathaniel,’ he stood up. The air tasted gritty and thick. It was hot. ‘Come on. You must go through the window.’ Nathaniel started. ‘I can’t leave you.’

‘You must go... take your phone. Find help.’ Marcel steadied himself with one hand on the wall. He was losing it. ‘It’s the only way.’ Marcel barely saw her nod in the dark. When she stood up, he could smell her sweat. For a crazy second, he wished he could hug her, and tell her it would be okay.

But there was no time. An image of Dayna popped into his head, the mangled ruin of her car, her legs shriveling slowly to pale-white stalks, his fault.

Marcel bent down, gripped Nathaniel by the waist, and helped her climb onto his shoulders. She drove a foot into his chest by accident, and he nearly lost it and fell. He was weak. It was the goddamn smoke. But he managed to steady himself and straighten up.

‘The window!’ Nathaniel gasped.

And Maggie, somehow, understood. She fumbled for the wrench she had spotted earlier and passed it upward.

Nathaniel swung...

There was a tinkling. A rush of air blew into the room, and after just a second a whooshing sound, as the fire- beyond the door, edging closer-sensed that air, felt it, and surged toward it, like an ocean thundering toward the beach. Black smoke poured underneath the door.

‘Go!’ Marcel shouted.

He felt Nathaniel kick his head, his ear; then she was outside.

He dropped to his knees again. He could barely see. ‘You are next,’ he said to Maggie.

‘I’ll never fit.’ She said it in a whisper, but somehow, he heard. He was relieved. He did not think he had the strength left to lift her.

His head was spinning. ‘Lie down,’ he said, in a voice that did not sound like his own. She did, pressing flat against the ground. He was glad to lie down too. Lifting Nathaniel that small distance had exhausted him. It was as though the smoke was a

blanket - as though it was covering him, and telling him to sleep...

He was back on the carousel again. But this time the spectators were screaming. And it had started to rain. He wanted to get off - the ride was whirling faster and faster - lights were spinning overhead- lights, spinning, voices shouting.

Sirens screaming.

Sky.

Air.

Someone-Mom? -saying,

'You are okay, son. You are going to be okay.'

Part: 7

SATURDAY,

JULY 9

Maggie,

WHEN MAGGIE WOKE UP, SHE IMMEDIATELY KNEW SHE was in a hospital, which was disappointing. In movies, people were always groggy and confused and asking where they were and what had happened. But there was no mistaking the smell of disinfectant, the clean white sheets, the beep-beep-beep of medical equipment. It was pleasant-the sheets were clean and crisp; her mom and Bo were not shouting; the air did not reek of old alcohol. She had slept better than she had in a long time, and for several minutes she kept her eyes closed, breathing deeply.

Then Joh- John was speaking, quietly.

‘Come on, Maggie. We know you are faking. I can tell your eyelid is twitching.’ Maggie opened her eyes.

Joy surged in her chest. Joh- John was sitting in a chair drawn up to the bed, leaning forward, as close as he could get without crawling into the cot with her.

Nathaniel was there too, eyes were swollen from crying, and she rocketed straight at Maggie.

‘Maggie.’ She started sobbing again. ‘Oh my God, Maggie. I was so scared.’

‘Hi, Nathaniel.’ Maggie had to speak through a mouthful of Nathaniel’s hair, which tasted like soap. She must have showered.

‘Don’t suffocate her, Nathaniel,’ Joh- John said. Nathaniel drew back, still sniffing, but she kept a grip on Maggie’s hand, as though she were worried Maggie might float away.

Joh- John was smiling, but his face was sheet white and there were dark circles under his eyes. Maggie thought he had been sitting by her bed all night, worried she might be dying. The idea pleased her.

Maggie did not bother asking what had happened. It was obvious. Nathaniel had gotten help, somehow, and Maggie must have been carted off to the hospital when she passed out. So, she asked, ‘Is Marcel, okay? Where is he?’

‘Gone. He got up a few hours ago and walked out. He is okay,’ Nathaniel said all in a rush. ‘The doctor said you’d be okay too.’

‘You won the challenge,’ Joh- John said, his face expressionless. Nathaniel shot him a look. Maggie inhaled again.

When she did, she felt a sharp pain between her ribs. 'Does my mom know?' she asked. Nathaniel and Joh- John exchanged a glance.

'She was here,' Joh- John said. Maggie felt her chest seize again. She was here meaning she had left.

Of course...?

'Lily, too,' he rushed on. 'She wanted to stay. She was hysterical-' 'It is all right,' Maggie said. Joh- John was still looking at her weirdly like someone had just forced a handful of Sour Patch Kids into his mouth. It occurred to her that she must look like crap, smelled like crap too. She felt her face heat up. Great. Now she would look like crap warmed over.

'What?' she said, trying to sound annoyed without breathing too hard.

'What is it?'

'Listen, Maggie. Something happened last night, and your' The door swung open, and Mrs. Dalcas came into the room, balancing two cups of coffee and a sandwich filmed in plastic, obviously from the cafeteria.

Mr. Dalcas was right behind her, carrying a duffel bag Maggie recognized as belonging to Nathaniel.

'Maggie!' Ms. Dalcas beamed at her. 'You're awake.'

'I told my parents,' Nathaniel said unnecessarily, under her breath.

'It's all right,' Maggie said again. And secretly, she was pleased that Ms. and Mr. Dalcas had come. She was suddenly worried she might cry. Mr. Dalcas' hair was sticking straight up, and he had a grass stain on one of the knees of his khakis; Mrs. Dalcas was wearing one of her pastel cardigans, and both were

looking at Maggie as though she had come back from the dead. She had. For the first time, she realized, really realized, how close she had come. She swallowed rapidly, willing back the urge to cry.

‘How are you feeling, sweetheart?’ Ms. Dalcas put the coffees and sandwiches on the counter and sat down on Maggie’s bed. She reached out and smoothed back Maggie’s hair; Maggie imagined, just for a second, that Ms. Dalcas was her real mother.

‘You know.’ Maggie tried and failed to smile.

‘I had my dad bring some stuff,’ Nathaniel said. Mr. Dalcas hitched the duffel bag a little higher, and it occurred to Maggie that she had lost her bag- left it in the Graybill house. It was ashes by now. ‘Magazines. And that fuzzy blanket from my basement.’ The way Nathaniel was talking made it seem as if Maggie was going to be staying here.

‘I’m really fine.’ She sat up a little higher in bed, as though to prove it. ‘I can go home.’ ‘The doctors need to make sure there’s no damage inside,’ Ms. Dalcas said. ‘It might be a little while.’

‘Don’t worry, Maggie,’ John said quietly. He reached out and took her hand; she was startled by the softness of his touch, by the slow warmth that radiated from his fingertips through her body. ‘I’ll stay with you.’ I love you. She thought the words suddenly; this urge, like the earlier urge to cry, she had to will down.

‘Me too,’ Nathaniel said loyally.

‘Maggie needs to rest,’ Ms. Dalcas said. She was still smiling, but the corners of her eyes were creased with worry. ‘Do you remember what happened last night, honey?’

Maggie tensed. She was not sure how much she should say. She looked to Nathaniel and Joh- John for cues, but both avoided her eyes. 'Most of it,' she said cautiously. Ms. Dalcas was still watching her extra carefully as if she were worried Maggie might suddenly crack apart or begin bleeding from the eyeballs. 'And do you feel up to talking about it, or would you rather wait?'

Maggie's stomach began to twist.

Why wouldn't Joh- John, and Nathaniel look at her?
'What do you mean, talking about it?'

Part: 8

'The police are here,' Joh- John blurted out. 'We tried to tell you.' 'I don't get it,' Maggie said. 'They think that the fire wasn't an accident,' Joh- John said. Maggie felt like he was trying to communicate a message to her with his eyes, and she was too stupid to get it. 'Someone burned the house down on purpose.'

'But it was an accident,' Nathaniel insisted.

'For God's sake, both of you.'

Ms. Dalcas rarely lost her temper; Maggie was surprised to even hear her say 'God.' 'Stop it. You are not doing anybody any good by lying. This is because of that game Fright, or whatever you call it. Do not try to pretend it is not. The police know. It is all over.

Honestly, I would have expected better.

Especially from you, Joh- John.' Joh- John opened his mouth, then closed it again. Maggie wondered whether he had been about to defend himself. But that would mean selling out

Maggie and Nathaniel. She felt ashamed. Fear. The word seemed horribly spoken aloud, here, in this clean white place.

Ms. Dalcas's voice turned gentle again. 'You'll have to tell them the truth, Maggie,' she said. 'Tell them everything you know.'

Maggie was starting to freak. 'But I don't know anything,' she said. She pulled her hand away from Joh- John's; her palm was starting to sweat. 'Why do they need to talk to me? I did not do anything.'

'Someone is dead, Maggie,' Ms. Dalcas said. 'It's very serious.' For a second, Maggie was sure she had misheard. 'What?' Ms. Dalcas looked stricken. 'I thought you knew.' She turned to Nathaniel. 'I was sure you would have told her.' Nathaniel said nothing.

Maggie turned to Joh- John. Her head took an exceptionally long time to move around her neck. 'Who?' She spoke.

'Little Bill Kelly,' Joh- John said. He tried to find her hand again, but she pulled away.

Maggie could not speak for a moment. The last time she had seen Little Bill Kelly, he was sitting at a bus stop, feeding pigeons from the cup of his hands. When she smiled at him, he waved cheerfully and said, 'Hiya, Christy.' Maggie had no idea who Christy was. She had barely known Little Kelly-he was older than she was and had been away for years in the army.

'I don't-' Maggie swallowed. Mr. and Ms. Dalcas were listening closely. 'But he wasn't -' 'He was in the basement,' Joh- John said. His voice broke.

‘Nobody knew. You could not have known.’ Maggie closed her eyes. Color bloomed behind her eyelids. Fireworks. Fire... smoke in the darkness. She opened her eyes again.

Mr. Dalcas had gone into the hall. The door was partly open. She heard murmured voices, the squeak of someone’s shoes on the tile floor. He poked his head back in the room. He looked almost apologetic.

‘The police are here, Maggie,’ he said.

‘It’s time.’

Part: 9

MONDAY, JULY

Marcel,

‘CAN I HAVE SOME WATER, PLEASE?’

Marcel was not thirsty, but he wanted a second to sit, catch his breath, and look around.

‘Sure thing.’ The police officer who had greeted Marcel and ushered him into a small, windowless office- OFFICER-SADOWSKI, read his name tag-had not stopped smiling like he was a teacher and Marcel was his favorite student.

‘You just sit tight. I will be right back.’

Marcel sat very still while he waited just in case someone was watching.

He did not have to turn his head to take in everything: the desk, piled high with manila file folders; the shelves stacked with more papers; a prehistoric telephone, unplugged; photographs of several- fat, smiling babies; a desk fan. It was a good thing, he thought, that Sadowski had not brought him into an interrogation room.

Sadowski was back in only a minute, carrying a Styrofoam cup full of water. He was on a mission to seem approachable. 'You relaxed? Happy with the water? You do not want a beverage or anything?'

'I'm fine.' Marcel took a sip of the water and nearly choked.

'It was piss-warm.'

Sadowski either did not notice or pretended not to. 'Glad you decided to come down and talk to us.

Dan, right?'

'Marcel,' Mason said, who was just sucking air and taking up space. 'Marcel.' He said again, then Sadowski took a seat behind his desk. He made a big show of shuffling around some papers, grinning like an idiot, twirling a pen, and leaning back in his chair. All casual. But Marcel noticed that he had Marcel's name written down on a piece of white paper.

'Right. Right. Marcel. Hard to forget. So- what can I do for you, Marcel?'

Marcel was not buying the village idiot act, not for a second. Officer Sadowski's eyes were narrow and smart. His jaw was like a right triangle.

He would be a mean old bastard when he felt like it.

'I'm here to talk about the fire,' Marcel said. 'I figured you'd want to talk to me eventually.' It had been two days since Marcel had woken up in the hospital. Two days of waiting for the knock on the door, for the police officers to show up and start grilling him. The waiting, the tickling feeling of anxiety, was worse than anything.

So earlier that morning he had woken with a resolution: he would not wait anymore.

‘You’re the young man who left the hospital on Saturday morning, aren’t you?’ Right. As though he had forgotten. ‘We just missed talking to you. Why would you run off in such a hurry?’ ‘My sister - needs help.’ He realized, belatedly, he should not have mentioned his sister. It would only lead to bad places.

But Sadowski seized on it. ‘What kind of help?’

‘She’s in a wheelchair,’ Marcel said, with some effort. He hated saying words aloud. It made them seem more real, and final.

Sadowski nodded sympathetically.

‘That is right. She was in a car accident a few years ago, wasn’t she?’

D*ick... So, the village idiot thing was a trick. He had done his homework.

‘Yup,’ Marcel said. He thought Sadowski would ask him more about it, but he just shook his head and muttered, ‘Shame.’ Marcel started to relax. He took a sip of water. He was glad he had come. It made him look confident. He was confident.

Then Sadowski said, abruptly, ‘Have you ever heard of a game called Fear, Marcel?’

Marcel was glad he had already finished swallowing, so he could not choke. He shrugged. ‘I do not know. I never had too many friends around here.’

‘You have a few friends,’ Sadowski said. Marcel did not know what he was getting at. He consulted his page of notes

again. 'Maggie Nill. Natalie Dalcas. Someone must have invited you to that party.' That was the story that had gone around: a party in the Graybill House.

A bunch of kids get together to smoke weed, drink alcohol, freak one another out. Then: a stray spark. An accident. The blame was spread around that way and could not be pinned to anyone specific. Of course, Marcel knew it was all bullsh*t. Someone had lit the place up, deliberately. It was part of the challenge.

'Well, yes. Them. But they are not friends- friends.' Marcel felt himself blushing. He was not sure whether he had been caught in a lie.

Sadowski made a noise in the back of his throat Marcel did not know how to interpret. 'Why don't you tell me all about it? In your own words, at your own pace.'

Marcel told him, speaking slowly, so he would not screw it up, but not too slowly, so he would not seem nervous.

He told Sadowski he had been invited by Maggie; there had been rumors of a keg party, but when he got there, he found out it was lame, and there was hardly any alcohol at all. He had not been drinking.

(He congratulated himself on thinking of this-he would not get in trouble for anything, period.) Sadowski interrupted him only once. 'So why the closed room?'

Marcel was startled. 'What?' Sadowski only pretended to glance down at the report. 'The fire chiefs had to break down the door to get to you and the girl-Maggie. Why would you go off with her if the party were raging somewhere else?'

Marcel kept his hands on his thighs.

He did not even blink. 'I told you; the party was lame. Besides, I was hoping -' He trailed off suggestively, raising his eyebrows.

Sadowski got it. 'Ah. I see. Go on.'

There was not much else to tell; Marcel told him he must have fallen asleep next to Maggie. The next thing he knew, they heard people running and smelling smoke. He did not mention Nathaniel.

No need to explain how she had known to direct the firefighters to the back of the house unless he was asked. For a while, after Marcel finished talking, they sat in silence. Sadowski appeared to be doodling, but Marcel knew this, too, was an act. He had heard everything. Finally- Officer Sadowski sighed, set down his pen, and rubbed his eyes.

'It is tough sh*t, Marcel. Tough sh*t.' Marcel said nothing.

Sadowski went on. 'Bill Kelly was -is-a friend. He was in the force. Little Kelly went to Iraq. Do you know what I am saying?'

'Not really,' Marcel said. Sadowski stared at him. 'I am saying we are going to figure out exactly what happened that night. And if we find out the fire was started on purpose.'

He shook his head. 'That's a homicide, Marcel.'

Marcel's throat was dry. But he forced himself not to look away. 'It was an accident,' he said. 'Wrong place, wrong time.' Sadowski smiled. But there was no humor in it. 'I hope so.' Marcel decided to walk home. He was out of cigarettes and in a bad mood.

Now he was not so sure that going to the police officers had been a clever idea. The way Sadowski looked at him made him feel like the police officers thought he had started the damn fire. It was the judges who had to be, whoever they were.

Any one of the players could squeal about the game, and that would be the end of that. If Fear ended - Marcel had no plans beyond winning Fear-beating Ray in the final round of Joust and making sure it was a hard, bloody win. He had not thought of his life beyond that moment at all.

He would be arrested. He would go out in ablaze. He did not care either way. Dayna, his Dayna, had been destroyed, ruined forever, and someone had to pay.

But for the first time, he was seized with the fear that the game would end, and he would never get his chance. And then he would just have to live with the new Dayna on her plant-stalk legs, live with the knowledge that he had been unable to save her. Live with knowing Ray and Luke were fine, going through the world, breathing, and grinning and sh*tting and crapping on other people's lives too.

And that was impossible.

Unimaginable.

The sun was bright and high. Everything was still, gripped in the hard light. There was a bad taste in Marcel's mouth; he had not eaten yet today. He checked his phone, hoping Nathaniel might have called: nothing. They had spoken the day before, a halting conversation, full of pauses. When Nathaniel said her dad needed her downstairs and she had to get off the phone, he was sure she had been lying.

Marcel circumnavigated Dot's Diner, checking instinctively to see whether he could spot his mom behind the

smudgy glass windows. But the sun was too bright and turned everyone into a shadow.

He heard a burst of laughter from inside the house. He paused with his hand on the door. If his mom were home, he was not sure he could deal. She had been hysterical when he came home with a hospital bracelet, and since then she had been giving him the fisheye and grilling him every .5 seconds about how he was feeling like she could not trust him even to pee without risking death. Plus, the news about Little Kelly was all over Dot's Diner, and when she was not demanding whether Marcel thought he had a fever, she was gossiping about the tragedy.

But then the laughter sounded again, and he realized it was not his mom laughing-it was Dayna. She was sitting on the couch, a blanket draped over her legs. Ricky was sitting in a folding chair across from her; the chessboard was positioned on the coffee table. When Marcel entered, there were only a few inches between them.

'No, no,' she was saying, between fits of giggling. 'The knight moves diagonally.'

'Diag-on-alley,' Ricky repeated, in his heavily accented English, and knocked over one of Dayna's pawns.

'It's not your turn!' She shed her pawn back and let out another burst of laughter. Marcel cleared his throat. Dayna looked up.

'Marcel!' she cried. Both she and

Ricky jerked backward several inches.

'Hey.' He did not know why they both looked so guilty. He did not know why he felt so awkward, either-like he had

interrupted them in the middle of something far more intense than a game of chess.

‘I was just teaching Ricky how to play,’ Dayna blurted. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright. She looked better, prettier than she had in a while. Marcel thought she might even be wearing makeup.

He suddenly felt angry. He was out busting his ass for Dayna, almost dying, and she was at home playing chess with Ricky on the old marble board his mom had bought on- Marcel’s eleventh birthday, and that- Marcel had schlepped everywhere they had moved since then. Like she did not even care. Like he was not playing Fear just for her.

‘Want to play, Marcel?’ She asked.

But he could tell she did not mean it. For the first time- Marcel looked, really looked, at Ricky. Could he be serious about marrying Dayna? He was twenty-one, twenty-two, tops. Dayna would never do it. The guy barely spoke any English, for Christ’s sake. And she would have told- Marcel if she liked him. She had always told- Marcel everything.

‘I just came in to get a drink,’

Marcel said. ‘I’m going out again.’ In the kitchen, he filled a glass with water and kept the sink running while he drank, to drown out the sound of muffled conversation from the next room. What were they talking about? What did they have in common? When he shut off the sink, the voices fell abruptly into silence again.

Jesus...

Marcel felt like he was trespassing in his own house. He left without saying goodbye. As soon as he shut the door, he heard laughter again. He checked his phone. He had a response

from Maggie, finally. He had texted her earlier: Heard anything? Her text reads simply: Game over. Marcel felt a surge of nausea riding up from his stomach to his throat. And he knew, then, what he had to do.

Marcel had been to Hanrahan's house only once before, two years earlier, when Dayna was still in the hospital- when, briefly, it had seemed like she might not wake up. Marcel had not budged from the chair next to her bed except to pee and smoke cigarettes in the parking lot and get coffee from the cafeteria.

Finally, Marcel's mom had convinced him to go home and get some rest. He had gone home, but not to rest. He had stopped in only long enough to remove the butcher's knife from the kitchen and the baseball bat from the closet, along with a pair of old ski gloves that had never, as far as he knew, been used by anyone in his family.

It took him a while to find Ray and- Luke's house on his bike, in the dark, half-delirious from the heat, no sleep, and the rage that was strangling him, coiled like a snake around his gut and throat. But he did, finally: a two-story structure, all dark, that might have been nice one hundred years ago. Now it looked like a person whose soul had been sucked out through his asshole: collapsed and desperate, wild, and wide-eyed, sagging in the middle. Marcel felt a flash of pity.

He thought of the tiny apartment behind Dot's, how his mom put daffodils in old pickle jars on the windowsills and scrubbed the walls with bleach every Sunday. Then he remembered what he had come to do. He left his bike on the side of the road, slipped on his gloves, removed the baseball bat and knife from his duffel bag.

He stood there, willing his feet to move. A swift kick to the door, the sound of screaming. The knife flashing in the dark,

the whistle of the bat cutting through the air. He was after Luke and Luke alone...

It would be easy...

Quick...

But he had not managed it. He had stood there with his legs numb, heavy, useless, for what felt like hours, until he began to fear that he would never move again- he would be frozen in this position, in the darkness, forever.

At some point, the porch light had clicked on, and Marcel had seen a heavy woman, with a face like a pulpy fruit, wearing a tent-like nightgown and no shoes, maneuver her bulk out onto the porch and light up a cigarette. Luke's mother. All at once, Marcel could move again. He had stumbled toward his bike.

It was not until he was four blocks away that he realized he was still holding the knife and he had dropped the baseball bat on the lawn. It had been two whole years, to the day.

Ray's house looked even more run-down in the daylight. The paint was shedding like gray dandruff. On the porch were two tires, a few smelly armchairs, and an old porch swing hanging on rusty chains, which looked like it would collapse under the slightest pressure. There was a doorbell, but it was disconnected. Instead, Marcel banged loudly on the frame of the screen door.

In response, the TV inside was abruptly muted. For the first time, it occurred to Marcel that it might not be Ray who answered the door, but that pulpy woman from two years ago- or a father or someone else entirely. But it was Ray. He was wearing only basketball shorts. For a split second, he hesitated, obviously startled, just behind the screen.

Before Marcel could say anything, Ray kicked open the screen door. Marcel had to jump back to avoid it. He lost his footing.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ The sudden motion had screwed Marcel up. He was already off-balance when Ray grabbed him by the shirt and then shoved him.

Marcel stumbled down the porch stairs and landed in the dirt on his elbows. He bit down on his tongue. And Ray was above him, in a rage, ready to pounce.

‘You must be out of your mind,’ he spat out. Marcel rolled away from him and scrambled to his feet. ‘I’m not here to fight.’

Ray let out a bark of laughter. ‘You don’t have a choice.’ He took a step forward, swinging; but Marcel had regained his balance and sidestepped him.

‘Look.’ Marcel held up a hand.

‘Just listen to me, okay? I came to talk.’ ‘Why the hell would I want to talk to you?’ Ray said. His hands were still balled into fists, but he did not try and swing again.

‘We both want the same thing,’ Marcel said.

Part: 10

For a second, Ray said nothing. His hands uncurled. ‘What’s that?’ ‘Fear.’ Marcel wet his lips. His throat was dry. ‘Both of us need them.’ There was electric tension in the air, hot and dangerous. Ray took another quick step forward.

‘Luke told me about your little threats,’ Ray said. ‘What kind of game do you think you’re playing?’ Ray was so close; Marcel could smell cornflakes and sour milk in his breath. But he did not step back.

‘There’s only one game that matters,’ he said. ‘You know it. Luke knew it too. That is why he did what he did, isn’t it?’ For the first time, Ray looked afraid. ‘It was an accident,’ he said.

‘He never meant-’

‘Don’t...!’ Ray shook his head. ‘I didn’t know,’ he said. Marcel knew he was lying.

‘Are you going to help me, or not?’ Marcel asked. Ray laughed again: an explosive, humorless sound. ‘Why should I help you?’ he asked. ‘You want me dead.’ Marcel smiled. ‘Not like this,’ he said. And he meant it, 100 percent. ‘Not yet.’

Sometime around midnight, when Carp was quiet, dazzling in a light sheen of rain, Even Seller woke in the dark to rough hands grabbing him. Before he could scream, he was gagging at the taste of cotton in his mouth. A sock, and then he was lifted, carried out of bed and into the night.

His first, confused, thought was that the police officers had come to take him away. If he had been thinking clearly, he would have realized that his assailants were wearing ski masks.

He would have noticed that the trunk they forced him into belonged to a navy-blue Taurus, like the kind his brother drove. That it was his brother’s car, parked in its usual spot.

But he was not thinking clearly. He was Feared. Kicking out, watching the sky narrow to a sliver as the trunk closed over him, Even felt something wet and realized that, for the first time since he was five years old, he had peed himself.

At last, he realized too that despite everything, the game was ongoing. And that he had just lost.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 13

Maggie,

THE WAR MEETING TOOK PLACE AT JOH- JOHN'S HOUSE. IT had to. Maggie's trailer was too small, Marcel would not have invited them to his place, and Nathaniel's parents were home all day doing a garage clean. Maggie had to bring Lily.

Lily had nothing to do now that school was over, and most days took the bus by herself a half-hour to Hudson, where the library was. But the library was understaffed and closed for a week while the director was on vacation. For once, Lily was in a good mood, even though she was dirty and sweaty and stank like horses; in the morning, she had helped Maggie at Anne's.

She sang a song about white Bengals to Joh- John's house and made waves with her arm out the window. Joh- John lived in the woods. His father had once owned an antique store and pawnshop, and Joh- John liked to say his dad 'collected' things.

Maggie always threatened to sign them up for that TV show about hoarders. The house and the yard around it was littered with stuff, from junk to bizarre: at least two to three old cars always, in various states of repair; crates of spray paint; rusted slides; stacks of timber; old furniture, half-embedded in the soil. Lily ran off, yelling, weaving through the old piles.

Maggie found Nathaniel and Joh- John behind the house, sitting on an old merry-go-round, which no longer turned.

Joh- John looked as though he had not slept in days. He pulled Maggie into a hug as soon as he saw her, which was weird. She tensed up; she smelled like stables.

‘What’s up with you?’ Maggie said when he pulled away. The circles under his eyes were as dark as a bruise.

‘Just glad to see you,’ he said.

‘You look like crap.’ She reached out to smooth down his hair, an old habit. But he caught her wrist. He was staring at her intensely like he wanted to memorize her face.

‘Maggie-,’ he started to say.

‘Maggie!’ Nathaniel called out at the same time. She, at least, seemed unaffected by Bill Kelly’s death. ‘I mean, it’s not like we knew him,’ she had said days earlier when Maggie had told her how guilty she felt.

Maggie did not wait for Nathaniel to speak, although Nathaniel had called the meeting. ‘I’m out,’ she said. ‘I’m not playing anymore.’

‘We have to wait for Marcel,’ Nathaniel said.

‘I don’t have to wait for anyone,’

Maggie said. She was annoyed by Nathaniel’s calm. She was blinking happily, sleepily, in the sun-as though nothing had happened. ‘I am not playing anymore.’

It is as simple as that.’

‘It’s sick,’ Joh- John said fiercely.

‘Sick. Anyone in their right minds-’ ‘The judges are not in their right minds, though, are they?’ Nathaniel said, turning to him. ‘I mean, they cannot be. You heard about Even?’

‘That wasn’t-’ Joh- John abruptly stopped speaking, shaking his head.

'I, for one, don't plan on losing my chance at sixty-seven thousand dollars,' Nathaniel said, still with that infuriating calm. Then she shook her head. 'It isn't right to start without Marcel.'

'Why?' Maggie fired back. 'Why are you so worried about- Marcel? I made the deal with you, remember?' Nathaniel looked away, and then Maggie knew. A bitter taste rushed into her throat. 'You made a deal with him, too,' she said. 'You lied to me.'

'No.' Nathaniel looked at her, eyes wide, pleading. 'No. Maggie. I never planned to cut him in.'

'What are you talking about?'

Joh- John asked. 'What do you mean,

'Cutting him in?'

'Stay out of it, Joh- John,' Maggie said.

'I'm in it,' he said. He dragged a hand through his hair, and in that instant, Maggie felt they would never get back to normal: to make fun of Joh- John's hair, to load it with gel and twisting to make it stick straight up. 'You're at my house, remember?'

'This isn't a game anymore,' Maggie said. Everything was spiraling out of control. 'Don't you get it? Someone's dead.'

'Jesus.' Joh- John sat down heavily, rubbing his eyes, as though Maggie saying the words had made them real.

'Why did you play, Maggie?' Nathaniel stood up when Joh- John sat down. Her arms were crossed, and she made little clicking noises with her tongue.

Rhythmic... A pattern. 'If you did not want the risk if you could not handle it, why did you play? Because Matt stupid

Hefley dumped you? Because he was sick of getting blue-balled by his girlfriend?' Maggie lost her breath. She was conscious of the air coming out of her at once, escaping in a short hiss. Joh- John looked up and spoke sharply: 'Nathaniel.'

Even Natalie looked surprised and immediately guilty. 'I'm sorry,' she said quickly, avoiding Maggie's eyes. 'I didn't mean-'

'What did I miss?' Maggie turned. Marcel had just appeared, emerging from the glittering maze of junk and scrap metal. She wondered what they looked like to him: Nathaniel flushed and guilty, Joh- John awful white, wild-eyed; and Maggie blinking back tears, still sweaty from the stables. And all of them angry: you could feel it in the air, a physical force among them.

Suddenly Maggie realized that this, too, was because of the game. That was part of it.

Only Marcel seemed unaware of the tension. 'Mind if I smoke?' He asked Joh- John. Joh- John shook his head.

Maggie broke in. 'I am out. I said I was out, and I meant it. The game should have ended...'

'The game never ends,' Marcel said. Nathaniel turned away from him and for a moment, just a moment, he looked uncertain. Maggie was relieved. Marcel had changed this summer. He was not the slope-shouldered weirdo, the outsider, who had sat for three years in silence. It was as though the game was feeding him somehow like he was growing on it.

'You heard about Even?' He exhaled a straight stream of smoke. 'That was me.'

Nathaniel had turned back to him. 'You?'

‘Me, and Ray Hanrahan.’

There was a moment of silence.

Maggie finally managed to speak.

‘What?’

‘We did it.’ Marcel took a final drag and ground out the cigarette butt underneath the heel of his cowboy boot.

‘That’s against the rules,’ Maggie said. ‘The judges set the challenges.’ Marcel shook his head. ‘It’s Fear,’ he said. ‘There are no rules.’ ‘Why?’ Joh- John tugged at his left ear. He was furious and trying not to show it; that was his tell.

‘To send a message to the judges. The players, too. The game will go on, one way or another. It must.’

‘You don’t have the right,’ Joh- John said.

Marcel shrugged. ‘What’s right?’ he said. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘What about the police officers? And the fire? What about Bill?’ No one said anything. Maggie realized she was shaking.

‘I’m done,’ she said. She spun around and nearly collided with a rusty-spotted furnace, which, along with an overturned bike, marked the beginning of the narrow path that wound through the landscape of litter and junk to the house, and around to the front yard. Joh- John called out to her, but she ignored him. She found Lily crouching in a bit of yard uncluttered by junk, marking the bare grass with bright-blue spray paint she had unearthed somewhere.

‘Lily...’ Maggie spoke sharply. Lily dropped the paint and stood up, looking guilty.

‘We’re going,’ Maggie said.

Lily’s frown reappeared, as did the small pucker between her eyebrows. Immediately, she seemed to shrink and age.

Maggie thought of the night she had whispered, ‘Are you going to die?’ and felt a fist of guilt hit her hard in the stomach. She did not know whether she was doing the right thing. She felt like nothing she did was right.

But what had happened to Bill Kelly was wrong. And pretending it had not happened was wrong too. That, she knew.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ Lily said, sticking out her lower lip.

‘Nothing.’ Maggie seized her wrist. ‘Come on.’

‘I didn’t get to say hi to Joh- John,’

Lily whined...

‘Next time,’ Maggie said. She practically dragged Lily to the car. She could not hear Nathaniel or Joh- John or Marcel anymore; she wondered whether they were talking about her. She could not get out of there fast enough. She drove in silence, gripping the wheel as though it was in danger of slipping suddenly from her hands.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 20

Maggie,

THE WEATHER TURNED FOUL, COLD AND WET, AND THE ground turned to sludge. For two days, Maggie heard nothing from Nathaniel. She refused to be the one to call first. She texted back and forth with Joh- John but avoided seeing

him, which meant that to go to work she had to bus it to the 7-Eleven and walk three-quarters of a mile in the driving rain, arriving wet and miserable just to stand for more hours in the rain, chucking the chickens soggy feed and hauling equipment into the sheds so it would not rust.

Only the white Bengal's seemed more miserable than she was; she wondered, as they huddled underneath a canopy of maple trees, watching her work, whether they dreamed of other places as much as she did. Africa, burnt grasses, a vast round sun. For the first time, it struck her as selfish that Anne kept them here, in this ceroplastic climate of blistering heat, followed by rain, followed by snow, sleet, and ice.

There were rumors that the police had turned up evidence of arson at the Graybill House. For an entire day, Maggie waited in agony, certain that the evidence had to do with her duffel bag, positive that the police would haul her off to jail. What would happen to her if she were accused of murder? She was eighteen. That meant she would go to real jail, not juvenile.

But when several more days passed, and no one came looking for her, she relaxed again. She had not been the one to light the stupid match. When you thought about it, this was all Matt Hefley's fault. He should be arrested.

And Delaney, too. About Fear, there was not a single whisper. Marcel's move had failed to rouse the judges to act. Maggie wondered whether he would try again, then reminded herself it was no longer her business. Still, it rained: this was mid-July in upstate New York, lush and green and wet as a rainforest.

Krista got sick from the humidity and the wetness in the air, saying it made her lungs feel clotty. Maggie refrained from pointing out that her lungs might feel better if she stopped

smoking a pack of menthol cigarettes a day. Krista called in sick to work and instead lay on the couch in a daze of cold medicine like something dead and bloated dragged up by the ocean.

At least Maggie could use the car. The library had reopened. She dropped- Lily there...

‘Want me to pick you up later?’ She asked.

Lily was back to being snotty. ‘I’m not a baby,’ she said as she slid out of the car, not even bothering with the umbrella Maggie had brought for her.

‘I’ll buy it.’

‘What about-?’ Before Maggie could remind her to take the umbrella, Lily had slammed the door and was dashing for the library entrance through a slow ooze of dark puddles. Despite the rain, Maggie was in a decent mood. Lily was twelve. It was normal for her to be a brat. It was even a good thing.

It showed she was growing up okay, the way that everyone else did so that she would not be messed up just because she had grown up in Fresh Pines with ants parading all over the spoons and Krista fumigating the house. And there were still no police knocking on her door, still not a single, solitary breath about- Fright.

Work was hard: Anne wanted her to muck the stables, and afterward, they had to re-caulk a portion of the basement, where the rain was coming in and the walls were speckled with mold.

Maggie was shocked when Anne stopped her for the day. It was five p.m., but Maggie had not noticed time passing, had barely looked up. The rain was worse than ever. It came down in whole sheets, like the quivering blades of a giant guillotine.

While Anne was preparing her cup of tea, Maggie checked her phone for the first time in hours, and her stomach went to liquid and pooled straight down to her feet. She had missed twelve calls from Lily. Her throat squeezed up so tight she could hardly breathe. She punched Lily's number at once. Her cell phone went straight to voicemail.

'What is the matter, Maggie?' Anne was standing at the oven, her gray hair frizzing around her face, like a strange halo.

Maggie said, 'I have to go.'

Afterward, she did not remember getting into the car or backing it down the driveway; she did not remember the drive to the library, but suddenly she was there. She parked the car but left the door open. Some of the puddles were ankle-deep, but she hardly noticed. She sprinted to the entrance; the library had been closed for an hour.

She called Lily's name, circled the parking lot, searching for her. She scanned the streets as she drove, imagining all the terrible things that might have happened to Lily- like- she had been hurt, scared, killed-and trying to stop herself from losing it, throwing up, or breaking down.

Finally, she had no choice but to go home. She would have to call the police. Maggie fought back another wave of- Terror. This was it, the real thing. The road leading to 'Fresh Pines' was full of ruts, sucking black mud, deep water.

Maggie bumped through it, tires spinning and grinding. The place looked sadder than usual: the rain was beating fists on the trailers, pulling down wind chimes and overflowing outdoor fire pits.

Maggie had not even stopped the car when she spotted Lily: huddled underneath a skinny birch tree missing most of its

leaves, only fifteen feet away from the trailer steps, arms wrapped around her legs, shivering.

Maggie must have parked because suddenly, she was rocketing out of the car, splashing through the water, taking Lily in her arms.

‘Lily!’ Maggie could not hug her sister tight enough. Here, here, here.

Safe. ‘Are you okay? Are you all, right? What happened?’

‘I’m cold.’ Lily’s voice was muffled. She spoke into Maggie’s left shoulder. Maggie’s heart seized up; she would have spun the world in reverse for a blanket.

‘Come on,’ she said, pulling away.

‘Let’s get you inside.’ Lily reared back, like a bucking horse. Her eyes went huge, wild. ‘I won’t go in there,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to go in there!’

‘Lily.’ Maggie blinked rain out of her eyes, crouching down so she was eye level with her sister. Lily’s lips were ringed blue. God. How long had she been out here? ‘What’s going on?’

‘Mom told me to go away,’ Lily said. Her voice had turned small, broken. ‘She-she told me to play outside.’

Something inside Maggie cracked, and at that moment- she was conscious that all her life she had been building up walls and defenses in preparation for something like this; behind them, the pressure had been mounting, mounting. Now the dam broke, and she was flooded, drowning in rage and hate.

‘Come on,’ she said. She was surprised she still sounded the same when inside of her was a sucking blackness, a furious

noise. She took Lily's hand. 'You can sit in the car, okay? I will turn on the heat. You will be nice and dry.'

She brought Lily to the car. There was an old T-shirt in the back- Krista's, reeking of smoke-but it was dry, at least. She helped Lily wriggle out of her wet shirt.

She untied Lily's shoes for her, and peeled off her wet socks, then made Lily press her feet up to the vents where the heat had begun to blow. The whole time Lily was limp, obedient as if all the life had been washed out of her. Maggie moved mechanically.

'I'll be right back,' she told Lily. She felt detached from the words, as though she was not the one speaking. The anger was drumming out the knowledge of everything else.

Boom, boom, and boom.

There was music coming from the trailer, practically shaking the walls.

The lights were on too, although the blinds were down; she could see a figure swaying in silhouette, dancing. She had not noticed before because she had been too worried about Lily. She kept seeing the little figure huddled underneath the pathetic birch- the single tree that Fresh Pines boasted. Mom told me to go away. She told me to play outside.

Boom, boom, boom.

She was at the door. Locked. From inside, she heard a shriek of laughter. Somehow, she fit the key in the lock; that must mean she was not shaking. Strange, she thought, and: Maybe I could have won Fear. She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

There were three of them: Krista, Bo, and Maureen, from Lot 99. They froze, and Maggie froze too. She was seized momentarily by the sense that she had entered a play and had forgotten all her lines-she could not breathe, did not know what to do. The lights were high and bright. They looked like actors, all three of the actors you see too close.

They were too made up. But the makeup was horrible. It looked as though it was beginning to melt, slowly deforming their faces. Their eyes were bright, glittering: doll eyes. Maggie took in everything at once: the blue haze of smoke. The empty beer bottles, the overflowing cups used as ashtrays, the single bottle of Georgi vodka, half empty.

And the small blue plastic plate on the table, still faintly outlined with the imprint of the Sesame Street characters -Lily is an old plate-now covered with thin lines of fine white powder. All of it hit Maggie like a physical blow, a quick sock to the stomach. Her world went black for a second. The plate. Lily's plate.

Then the moment passed. Krista brought a cigarette unsteadily to her lips, missing. 'Maggie Lynn,' she slurred. She patted her shirt, her breasts, as though expecting to find a lighter there. 'What are you doing, baby? Why are you staring at me like I am a-' Maggie lunged...?

Before her mother finished speaking before, she could think about what she was doing, all the rage traveled down into her arms and legs and she picked up the blue plate, crisscrossed with powder like it had been scarred by something, and threw it.

Maureen screamed, and Bo shouted. Krista barely managed to duck. She tried to right herself and, staggering backward, managed to land on

Maureen's lap, in the armchair. This made Maureen scream even louder. The plate collided with the wall with a thud, and the air was momentarily full of white powder, like indoor snow. It would have been funny if it were not so horrible.

'What the hell?' Bo took two steps toward Maggie and for a moment, she thought he might hit her. But he just stood there, fists clenched, red-faced, and enraged. 'What the hell?' Krista fought to her feet. 'Who in the goddamn do you think you are?'

Maggie was glad that they were separated by the coffee table. Otherwise, she was not sure what she would do. She wanted to kill Krista. Kill her.

'You're disgusting.' Her voice sounded mangled like something had wrapped around her vocal cords.

'Get out.' The color was rising in

Krista's face. Her voice, too, was rising, and she was shaking as though something awful was going to detonate inside her.

'Get out! Do you hear me? Get out!' She reached for the vodka bottle and threw it. Fortunately, she was slow. Maggie sidestepped it easily. She heard shattering glass and felt the splash of liquid.

Bo put his arms around Krista. He managed to restrain her. She was still shrieking, writhing like an animal, face red, twisted, and awful. And suddenly all the anger, the writhing snake in Maggie's stomach, was released. She felt absolutely nothing. No pain. No anger. No fear. Nothing but disgust. She felt, weirdly, as if she were floating above the scene, hovering in her own body. She turned and went to her bedroom. She

checked her top drawer first, in the plastic jewelry box where she kept her earnings. Everything was gone but forty dollars. Of course. Her mom had stolen it.

This did not bring a fresh wave of anger, only a new kind of disgust.

Animals. They were animals, and Krista was the worst of them. She pocketed the twenties and moved quickly through the room, stuffing things in Lily's backpack: shoes, pants, shirts, underwear. When the backpack was full, she bundled things up in one of the comforters.

They would need a blanket, anyway. And toothbrushes. She remembered reading in a magazine once that toothbrushes were the number one item travelers forgot to pack. But she would not forget.

She was calm, thinking straight. She had it all together. She slid the backpack onto one of her shoulders; it was so small; she could not fit it correctly.

Poor Lily...

She wanted to get food from the kitchen, but that would mean walking past her mom, Bo, and Maureen. She would have to skip it. There probably was not much she could use, anyway. At the last second, she took the rose off her dresser, the one John- John had made her from metal and wire. It would be good luck.

She hefted the blanket in her arms, now heavy with all the clothing and shoes it contained and shuffled sideways out of the bedroom door.

She had been worried her mom would try and stop her, but she should not have been. Krista was sitting on the couch, crying, with Maureen's arms around her. Her hair was a stringy

mess. Maggie heard her say, '...???... did everything - on my own.' Only half the words were audible. She was too messed up to speak clearly.

Bo was gone...

He had split since the drugs were nothing but carpet crumbs now. He had left to get more. Maggie pushed out the door. It did not matter. She would never see Bo again.

She would never see her mother or Maureen, or the inside of that trailer again. For one second, she could have sobbed, going down the porch steps. Never again -the idea filled her with relief so strong, it almost turned her knees to water and made her trip.

But she could not cry, not yet. She had to be strong for Lily. Lily had fallen asleep in the front seat, her mouth open, her hair feathering slightly in the heat. Finally, her lips were not blue anymore, and she was no longer shivering.

She did not open her eyes until they were just bouncing out of the entrance to the Pines and onto Route 51- like its- so-o deadly.

'Maggie?' she said in a small voice.

'What's up, Billy?' Maggie tried to smile and could not.

'I don't want to go back there.' Lily turned and rested her forehead against the window. In the glass's reflection, her face was narrow and pale, like a tapered flame. Maggie tightened her fingers on the wheel. 'We're not going back there,' she said. Weirdly, the words made the taste of sickness come up. 'We are never going back, okay? I promise.'

'Where will we go?' Lily asked.

Maggie reached over and squeezed Lily's knee. Her jeans had finally dried.

'We will figure something out. Okay?

We are going to be simply fine.' The rain was still coming down in sheets; the car carved waves in the road, sending liquid rivers sloshing toward the gutters. 'You trust me, right?' Maggie asked. Lily nodded without turning her face away from the window.

'We're going to be fine,' Maggie repeated, and returned both hands to the wheel, gripping tightly.

They could not, she realized, go to John's or Nathaniel's. She had taken her mom's car and had no intention of returning it, which counted as stealing.

And her friends' houses would be the first place her mom would think of looking when she sobered up and realized what had happened. Would she call the police? Would they track Maggie down? Her mom would convince them that Maggie was a delinquent, and they would try to pin the fire on her. But there was no point in worrying about that yet.

No one could know. It came down to that. She and Lily would have to be incredibly careful about the next few weeks. As soon as they had enough money to leave Carp, they would. And until then, they had to hide. They would have to hide the car, too, and use it only at night.

The idea came to her suddenly: Meth Row. The whole road was cluttered with old cars and abandoned houses. No one would notice one sh*ttier car was parked there.

Lily had fallen asleep again and was snoring quietly. Meth Row looked even bleaker than usual. The rain had turned the pitted road to sludge, and Maggie had trouble just keeping

the wheel from jerking under her hands. It was hard to tell which houses were occupied and which were not, but she finally found a spot next to a storage shed and an old Buick, stripped to its metal frame, where she could angle the car, so it was mostly unseen from the road.

She turned off the engine. No point in wasting gas. They would have to be careful about wasting anything now.

They would be more comfortable in the backseat, but since Lily was already asleep and Maggie doubted, she would sleep at all it was not even six o'clock -she reached into the back and shook out all the things from the comforter. Stuff that had only an hour ago been littering their beds, the floor of their bedroom.

Their home...

Homeless...

It was the first time the word occurred to her, and she pushed it out of her mind. It was an ugly word, a word that smelled. The runaways were better, a little more glam.

She spread the comforter over Lily, careful not to wake her. She found a hoodie in the back and put it on over her shirt, pulled up the hood, cinched the drawstrings tight.

Thankfully, it was summer and would not get too cold. It occurred to her that she should turn her cell phone off too, to conserve battery power. But before she did, she typed out a text to Nathaniel and Marcel. She included Joh- John too. Like he had said, he was in it, one way or another.

Changed my mind, she wrote. I am back in.

She was playing for keeps now.

For Lily. Forget the promise she had made to Nathaniel. The money would be hers, and hers alone.

That night, long after Maggie had finally drifted off, head back in the front seat of the Taurus-when Nathaniel was curled up in bed with her computer, searching for funny videos-when even the bars were shutting down and the people who wanted to drink were forced to do it outside, or in the parking lot of 7-Eleven -Ellie Hayes was woken up by two masked figures. They hauled her to her feet and handcuffed her wrists in front of her body as if she were a convict. Her parents were gone for the weekend-the players knew what they were doing.

Her older brother, Roger, heard the noise and the scuffling and burst into the hall, holding a baseball bat. But Ellie managed to cry out to him.

‘It’s Terror!’ she said. Roger lowered the baseball bat, shook his head, and returned to his room. He, too, had played.

Ellie’s biggest fear, other than floods, was an enclosure, and she was relieved when instead of being packed in the trunk, she was guided into the back seat of a car she did not recognize.

They drove for what seemed like forever-long enough that she began to get bored and fell asleep. Then the car stopped, and she saw a vast, empty parking lot, and a fence enclosed by barbed wire. Before the headlights were cut, she saw a weathered sign tacked to a sad, saggy-looking building.

WELCOME TO THE DENNY SWIMMING POOL.

HOURS 9 A.M.–DUSK, MEMORIAL DAY TO LABOR DAY.

The padlock on the gates had been left undone. Ellie remembered, as they passed through it, that Ray Hanrahan had done maintenance at the Swimming Pool last summer.

Could he be in on this? Across the wet grass, the squelching mud, to the edge of the pool, which sat glimmering slickly in the moonlight, faintly lit up from below, electric, and improbable. The fear came rushing back all at once. 'You have to be kidding me.'

She was at the edge of the deep end, trying to backpedal. But she could not move. They held her tightly. Something metal bit into the palm of her hands, and she curled her fingers instinctively around it, too frightened to think or wonder what it was. 'How do you expect me to-?'

She did not get to finish before she was pushed headfirst into the water. Flood. A flood of water everywhere: mouth, eyes, nose. She was underwater for a little more than a minute before she was hauled to the surface, but she would afterward swear it was at least five, or seven.

Endless seconds of her heartbeat thudding in her ears, her lungs screaming for air, her legs kicking for purchase. So many seconds of Fear-so complete, so all-consuming, it was not until she was once again in the open air, taking deep, grateful breaths, she realized that all along she had been clutching tightly to the small metal key that fitted her handcuffs.

Marcel's gamble, at last, paid off. In the morning, the story of Ellie spread, and by noon the betting slips had once again appeared. This time, they were passed from hand to hand, secretively, cautiously. Even Seller and Ellie Hayes had both failed their challenges. They were out of the game.

Colin Atkinson, too. He had been the first to flee the Graybill house-rumor that he had not stopped running until he was in Massachusetts. Marcel, Ray, Maggie, and Nathaniel were still in. So- where Harold Lee, Kim

Hollister, and Derek Klieg.

Only seven players left.

WEDNESDAY,

JULY 27

Marcel,

THERE WAS NO JOY LEFT IN THE GAME-NO LIGHTNESS or humor at all. Terror, as far as Marcel knew, had never been this serious. It had never been played with so much secretiveness, either. This was about more than getting in trouble for continuing a game. The police officers were still trying to pin the fire at the Graybill house, and Little Bill's death, on someone. Even the judges had lost their sense of humor. The next email that arrived, several days after Ellie had been eliminated from the game, was bleak to the point.

Malden Plaza, 1-85. 9:00 p.m.

Wednesday.

Joh- John drove. It felt almost routine: Maggie sat shotgun, Nathaniel and Marcel were in the back. Nathaniel spent the whole drive tapping the window with a knuckle, unconsciously beating out her private rhythm. Marcel could almost believe they were just heading on a late-night adventure to the mall. Except that Maggie looked exhausted and kept yawning, and Joh- John hardly said a word except to ask her, in a deep voice, what was wrong.

'What do you think is wrong?' Maggie replied. Marcel did not want to eavesdrop, but he could not help it. 'Your mom called,' Joh- John said after a pause. 'She said you haven't been home.'

'I am just staying at Anne's for a few days. I am fine.'

'She said you took the car.'

‘So now you’re on her side?’

Joh- John must have gone to Little Bill’s funeral. Marcel recognized the folded memorial pamphlet, featuring a winged angel, now hanging on a ribbon from his rearview mirror. Like a charm, or a talisman. It weird that he had felt the need to hang it. Joh- John did not strike

Marcel is superstitious. Then again, Marcel did not get Joh- John. He did not, for example, understand why he felt he was part of the game, why he felt guilty for Bill Kelly’s death.

When they passed the Columbia County water towers, Marcel looked out and remembered the night of the first raid, when he, Nathaniel, and Maggie had hidden from the police officers. He felt a sudden wrench of grief, for the way time, always goes forward, relentlessly. It was like floodwater: it left only clutter in its wake. The sky was choked with masses of dark clouds, but it had stopped raining at last.

Impossible to tell where the sun was coming from.

A thick beam of light, singular and strange when the rest of the sky was still so dark, cut across the road. But the drive to Malden Plaza was long; they had to loop around to get to the northbound side- and before they had arrived, the sun had set.

There were a few dozen cars in the lot, most of them hugging up as close to the McDonald’s as possible, plus a couple of eighteen-wheelers, trucks that must have been on a run from Albany to Canada. From the opposite side of the lot, Marcel watched a family emerging from the big swinging doors, carrying paper bags of fast food and large soda cups. He wondered where they were off to. Somewhere better than here.

The players had parked as far from the building as possible, at the edge of the lot, where the trees were creeping close to the pavement, and it was much darker. Seven players left and only two dozen spectators. Marcel was surprised that - Digging had bothered to show up. Standing under the tall, stiff-necked streetlamps, he looked green, as if he were in danger of vomiting.

'Rules are simple.' -Digging practically had to shout over the roar of traffic behind him. I-87, separated from the parking lot by only a flimsy, shin-high divider, was a six-lane mega highway.

'Each of you must cross. The five who cross the fastest move on. The other two do not.'

'I'll go first.' Ray stepped forward. He had avoided even glancing at Marcel. There was something like a truce between them, at least temporarily. It was fun. Ray was the guy- Marcel hated most in the world, besides Luke. And yet Ray was the guy who knew more of Marcel's secrets than anyone. 'I want to get this over with.'

'Wait.' -Digging extracted a strip of black fabric from his pocket and shook it out. He truly looked miserable. 'You have to wear this.'

'What is that?' Ray asked, even though it was a blindfold.

Nathaniel and Maggie exchanged a look.

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Marcel knew what they were thinking without having to ask. There was always a twist. The game was never easy. - Digging hesitated. For a second, it looked as though he was going to attempt to tie the blindfold to Ray himself.

Ray scowled at him. 'Give me that,' he said and snatched the blindfold from -Digging. -Digging backed off quickly, obviously relieved. Ray put the fabric over his eyes and knotted it behind his head.

'Happy now?' he said to no one in particular.

Marcel stepped forward, so he was standing directly in front of Ray. He threw a punch, stopping a few inches short of Ray's nose. Nathaniel gasped and -Digging shouted. But Ray did not even flinch.

'It's all right,' Marcel said. 'He can't see sh\*t.'

'Don't trust me, Mason?' Ray's mouth curled into a smile.

'Not even a little,' Marcel said. -Digging had to help guide Ray to the divider that separated the parking lot from the narrow patch of grass and gravel that ran along the highway. Trucks were thundering past, spitting exhaust, and roaring heat. A car blew its horn as Ray fumbled over the divider, and Marcel imagined a sudden swerve, the headlights swollen, freezing Ray in place, the shudder of the impact.

But that would come later.

'Time,' -Digging shouted. He had his phone out. For the first time, he noticed that Joh- John was standing some ways apart, his lips moving as though in silent prayer. His face was incredible: anguished, twisted. And at that moment, Marcel had a suspicion. More like an intuition. But he dismissed the thought quickly. Impossible.

'Ten seconds down,' -Digging announced. Marcel turned his eyes back to the highway. Ray was still hesitating, swaying like a drunk, like he was hoping momentum would unglue his feet. A truck blasted a horn, and he jerked backward. The sound

rolled and echoed through the night air, distorted by the distance to an alien cry. The motion was noise: Marcel closed his eyes and heard the fizz of the tires on the road, the thud of bass and music, engines grinding and spitting, the rush of air when a car blew by. He opened his eyes again.

‘Twenty seconds!’ -Digging’s voice had gone shrill. There was a sudden break in the traffic. Four, five seconds in all six lanes, the road was clear. Ray sensed it and ran. He barreled straight into the divider on the other side of the road and face planted. But it did not matter.

He had done it. He whipped off the blindfold and waved it above his head, victorious. The whole thing had taken him twenty-seven seconds. He had to wait for another brick in the traffic to cross, but this time he did so at a jog. He was showing off.

~\*~

‘Who’s next?’ -Digging said.

‘Let’s get this over with before-’ Another truck blasted by, whipping away the rest of his words.

‘I’ll go.’ Marcel stepped forward. Ray dangled the blindfold from one hand. For a second, their eyes met. They were joined now, more than ever.

‘Don’t choke,’ Ray said in a deep voice. Marcel snatched the blindfold from him.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ he said. The cloth was thick and opaque, like something you would fashion a tarp out of. Once-Marcel put it over his eyes, he was completely blind, and for a moment he felt a tightness in his chest, the overwhelming sense of disorientation and dizziness, like when you wake up from a nightmare in an unfamiliar place.

He focused on the sounds: trucks, music, the fizz of the tires, and gradually he could map out space in his mind. Funny how just being without sight could leave him feeling so exposed, raw. Anyone could rush at him, and he would never know. He felt two soft hands slip around his wrist.

‘Be careful,’ Nathaniel whispered. He did not answer, just fumbled to touch her face, hoping he would not accidentally get her boob instead. Hoping he would, too.

‘All right,’ he announced in what he hoped was - Digging’s direction. ‘I’m ready.’

As he had done with Ray, -Digging took his arm and guided him to the low metal divider and instructed him to climb it. Then- Marcel was standing blind on the side of the road, while cars and semis roared past him. The wind blew hot and stinking with exhaust, and the ground trembled from the motion of the crushing wheels. Horns screamed out and faded.

Marcel’s heart was going hard, and his mouth was dry. He had not expected to be so afraid. His ears were full of a pounding rhythm-he could not tell if it was noise from the highway or the echo of his heart. He barely heard -Digging call time.

Sh\*t!

He could not hear-like how- is- he going to know when to cross? What if he tripped? His legs felt liquid and unstable-if he tried to walk, they would collapse, get tangled up. He pictured Nathaniel’s hands, the way she had tilted her face to his when he kissed her.

He imagined Dayna’s stalked legs, imagined her chair pushed next to the window, the sun flooding the room, her legs

growing, thickening, sprouting again into strong, muscled calves.

The pounding in his ears receded. He could breathe again. And suddenly he realized it was quiet. No fizz of tires, no honking, no roar of an engine bearing down on him. A break.

He ran...

Pavement, and then a narrow strip of grass, which marked the space that divided the different sides of the highway. He should have stopped and listened again, just to be sure, but he couldn't-if he stopped, he would never go again. He had to keep moving. The wind was rushing in his ears and his blood was on fire. Suddenly he felt a searing pain in his shins, and he jerked forward.

He had reached the divider on the other side.

He had passed. He ripped off the blindfold and turned around. He thought Nathaniel and Maggie were cheering, but he was not sure two cars went by him, a twin blur, and although he could tell they were shouting, he could not hear what they said.

Underneath the streetlamp, they looked like actors on a stage, or tiny figurines, set up for display, and the cars, shining as they passed through the light, like toy models of the real thing.

He still felt dizzy. He waited for another brick in the traffic, then crossed back at a slow jog. He wanted to move faster, but his legs resisted.

He could barely lift them to climb over the divider. - Digging patted him on the shoulder and Maggie grabbed his arm. He was glad. Otherwise, he might have collapsed.



'Nineteen seconds!' -Digging said.

And Maggie kept saying,

'Awesome. Awesome.'

Maggie volunteered to go next. Something had happened to her in the past few days-something had changed.

She had always been pretty, Marcel thought -sturdy-looking and dependable, like someone in an advertisement about deodorant. A little awkward, too- always holding herself carefully, like she was worried if she did not pay attention, she would knock someone or something over.

He had not gone to prom, but he had seen pictures on Facebook, and Maggie had stood out; slouching a little so she would not be too much taller than Matt, wearing some ruffled pink thing that did not suit her at all, and trying to smile through her discomfort. But there was nothing awkward about her now. She was serious, straight-backed, focused. She barely hesitated at the edge of the road. As soon as there was a break, she ran. Nathaniel gasped.

'There's a car-,' she said. Her fingers tightened on Marcel's arm.

There was car-northbound traffic, speeding toward her. It must have caught her in its headlights just as she crossed into the lane, because the driver sounded his horn, three quick blasts.

'Jesus.' Joh- John was frozen, white-faced.'

Maggie!' Nathaniel screamed. But Maggie kept moving, and she reached safety just as the car blew over the spot where she had been standing only a few seconds earlier. The driver gave four more furious blasts on the horn. Maggie whipped off

the blindfold and stood, chest heaving, at the side of the road. For a while, she was lost to view in a surge of sudden traffic: two trucks passing simultaneously from opposite directions, a stream of cars.

When Maggie crossed back, -Digging through an arm around her shoulders.

'Seventeen seconds!' he crowed.

'Fastest one yet. You are safe.'

'Thanks,' she said. She was out of breath. As she passed under the streetlamp, she looked uniquely beautiful: long hair and tangled down her back, high cheekbones, and glittering eyes.

'Good job,' Marcel said.

Maggie nodded at him.

'Heath bar! I was so scared for you!

That car.' Nathaniel threw her arms around

Maggie's neck. She had to stand on her tiptoes.

'It's not that bad, Nathaniel,' Maggie said. For a second, she kept her eyes on Marcel. Something passed between them.

He thought it was a warning. Kim Hollister went next, and she was unlucky. As soon as she took her place blindfolded at the side of the road, there was a blast of traffic from both directions. But even after it cleared, she stayed where she was, hesitating, obviously afraid.

'Go!' -Digging shot. 'You are fine! Go.'

'No fair,' Ray said. 'No fair.'

That is freaking cheating.’ They started to argue, but it did not matter anyway; Kim still had not moved.

Finally, she screeched, ‘Be quiet!

Please. I cannot hear anything. Please.’ It took a few more seconds before she shuffled onto the road, and almost immediately she backed up again.

‘Did you hear that?’ Her voice was shrill in the quiet. ‘Is that a car?’

By the time she made it across, fifty-two seconds had elapsed. The longest time by almost double.

It was Natalie’s turn next. Suddenly she turned to him, eyes shining. He realized she was on the verge of tears.

‘Do you think he’s watching?’ Nathaniel whispered. Marcel thought she must be talking about God.

‘Who?’ He spoke.

‘Bill Kelly...’ A spasm passed over her face.

‘There’s no one watching us,’ Marcel said. ‘No one but the judges, anyway.’

His eyes met Joh- John is across the lot. And again, just for a minute, he wondered.

FRIDAY, JULY 29

Marcel,

Marcel HAD BEEN HOPING NATHANIEL’S BIRTHDAY PARTY would be small, and he was disappointed when he pulled his bike up to Joh- John’s house and saw a dozen cars fitted together like Tetris pieces in the only part of the yard not dominated by junk. There was music playing from somewhere,

and lanterns had been placed all around the yard, perched on various objects like metallic fireflies settling down to rest.

‘You came!’ Nathaniel weaved toward him, holding a paper cup. Beer sloshed on his shoe, and he realized she was already drunk. She was wearing lots of makeup and a tiny dress, and she looked frighteningly beautiful, like someone much older. Her eyes were bright like she was on something. He was aware that she had just been talking to a group of guys he did not know; they, too, looked older and were now staring at him and felt suddenly uncomfortable. She saw him looking and waved a hand. ‘Don’t worry about them,’ she said. Her words were slurring together.

‘Some guys I know from a bar in Kingston. I only invited them because they brought alcohol. I am so glad you are here.’

Marcel had Nathaniel’s present wrapped in tissue paper in his pocket. He wanted to give it to her but not here, while people were watching. He wanted to tell her, too, that he was sorry about Terror.

Nathaniel had frozen up at the side of the highway and taken more than a minute to cross. Just like that, the game was over for her.

Everyone else would move on to the next challenge. On the way home from the highway challenge, Nathaniel had barely said a word, just sat stiffly next to him with tears running down her face. No one had spoken. Marcel had been annoyed at Joh- John, and Maggie.

They were her best friends. They were supposed to know what to say to make her feel better. He had felt helpless, as frightened as he had while standing on that highway with the blindfold. But Nathaniel was already hauling him off toward the

back of the house. 'Come get a drink, okay? And say hi to everyone.'

At the back of the house, a large grill was letting off thick clouds of smoke that smelled like meat and charcoal. An old man was pushing around some burgers on it, holding a beer in one hand. Marcel thought it might have been Joh- John's dad- they had the same nose, the same floppy hair, although the men were gray- and was surprised. In school, he had always thought of Joh- John as kind of a dork, well-meaning but just too nice to be interesting. He had imagined Joh- John's family would be of the mom-dad-sister older- brother-picket-fence variety.

Not some guy with a beer grilling in the middle of towers of rusting junk. But that was another thing you learned when playing Fear: people would surprise you.

They would knock you on your ass. It was the only thing you could count on. Kids from the school were standing around in little groups or using some of the old furniture and gutted car frames as makeshift chairs. They were all staring at Marcel, some with curiosity and some with open hostility, and it was not until then that he realized none of the other Fear players had been invited, except for Maggie. That is when it hit him that there were few Fear players left.

Just five...

And he was one of them.

The two things- Nathaniel's hand, and the fact that he was getting so close- sent a thrill up his spine.

'The keg's over there, behind the old motorcycle.'

Nathaniel giggled. She gestured with her cup, sending another bit of beer sloshing over the rim, and he remembered suddenly the time she had called him Dave at homecoming last year. His

stomach tightened. He hated parties, never felt comfortable with them.

'I will be back, okay? I must circulate.

It is kinda my party.' She kissed him on the cheek, he noticed, and of course then again on the other cheek-and quickly disappeared, blending into a knot of people standing around the keg. Without Nathaniel next to him, he felt like he was back in the halls at school, except this time, instead of everyone ignoring him, everyone was staring. When he spotted Maggie, he could have run up and kissed her.

She saw him at the same time and waved him over. She was sitting on the hood of what Marcel could only imagine was one of John's projects: A Pinto junk-er, wheel-less and propped up on cinder blocks. He could count a half-dozen cars, in various states of construction and deconstruction, just from where he was standing.

'Hey...' Maggie was drinking a Coke. She looked tired. 'I didn't know you would be here.'

Marcel shrugged. He was not sure what that meant. Nathaniel had only invited him at the last minute. 'Didn't want to miss the big birthday,' was all he said.

'Nathaniel's trashed already,' Maggie said with a short laugh. She looked away, squinting.

Again, he was struck by the change that had come over her this summer. She was thinning out, sharpening, and her beauty was becoming more pronounced. Like she had been wearing an invisibility cloak her whole life, and now it was coming off. Marcel leaned against the hood and fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes.

He did not even feel like smoking-he just wanted something to do with his hands. 'How's Lily?' he asked. She looked at him sharply. 'She's fine,' she said slowly. Then: 'She's inside, watching TV.' Marcel nodded. The day before he had been smoking a cigarette in Meth Row when he had heard someone singing behind the shed where he usually kept his bike. Curious, he circled to the back.

And there was Maggie.

Butt-naked.

She had shouted, and he had turned quickly away, but not before he noticed she was washing with the hose from Dot's Diner, the one the kitchen boys used to spray down the alley in the evenings. He saw a car, her car, with clothes drying on its hood; and a girl who must have been Maggie's sister, sitting in the grass, reading.

'Don't tell,' Maggie had said.

Marcel had kept his back to her. One of the pairs of underwear had blown off the hood and onto the ground; he kept his eyes fixed on it. It was full-butt underwear, patterned with strawberries, faded. Next, to it, he had seen two toothbrushes and a curled-up tube of toothpaste sitting on an overturned bucket, and several pairs of shoes lined up neatly in the dirt. He wondered how long they had been camping out there.

'I won't,' he had said without turning around.

And he would not. That was another thing Marcel liked about secrets: they bonded people together. 'How long do you think you can keep it up?' he asked now.

'As long as it takes to win,' she replied.

He looked at her face so serious, so dead set-and felt a sudden surge of something like joy. Understanding. That is what it was; he and Maggie understood each other.

‘I like you, Maggie,’ he said.

‘You’re all right.’ She briefly scanned his face, as if to verify that he was not laughing at her.

Then she smiled. ‘Right back at you, Marcel.’

~\*~

Nathaniel reappeared, carrying a bottle of tequila. ‘Take a shot with me, Maggie.’ Maggie made a face. ‘Tequila?’

‘Come on,’ Nathaniel said, pouting. Her words were more blurred than ever, but her eyes kept their strange, unnatural brightness- like something not human. ‘It’s my birthday.’ Maggie shook her head. Nathaniel laughed.

‘I don’t believe it.’ Her voice was getting louder. ‘You’ll play Fear, but you’re afraid of taking a shot.’

‘Sh-h-h-h.’ Maggie’s face turned red. ‘She wasn’t even supposed to play,’ Nathaniel said, pointing the bottle at Maggie, as though addressing an audience. And people were listening. Marcel saw that they were turning in Maggie’s direction, smirking, whispering.

‘Come on, Nathaniel. You are not supposed to talk about the game, remember?’ he said, but Nathaniel ignored him.

-Then-

‘I was going to play,’ Nathaniel announced. ‘I did play. Not anymore. She-you- sabotaged me. You sabotaged me.’ She turned to Maggie.



Maggie stared at her for a second.

‘You’re drunk,’ she said matter-of-factly, then slid off the hood of the car.

Nathaniel tried to grab her. ‘I was just kidding,’ she said. But Maggie kept walking. ‘Come on, Heath. I was just freaking around.’

‘I’m going to find Joh- John,’ Maggie said without turning. Nathaniel leaned up against the car, next to Marcel. She uncapped the bottle of tequila, took a sip, and made a face.

‘Some birthdays,’ she grumbled. Marcel could scent her skin, the alcohol on her breathing, and strawberry shampoo in her hair. He was aching to touch her. Alternatively, he shoved his hands into his pocket and felt for the present. He knew he had to give it to her now before he chickened out or she got even more wasted.

‘Look, Nathaniel. Is there somewhere we could go? I mean, to be alone for a minute?’ Realizing she might think he was going to try to feel her up or something, he rushed on: ‘I have something for you.’ And he showed her the little tissue-paper-wrapped box, hoping she would not care that it had gotten squashed in his pocket. Her face changed. She smiled hugely, showing off her perfect little white teeth, and set the bottle of tequila down.

‘Marcel, you didn’t have to,’ she said.

And then: ‘Come on, I know somewhere we can go.’ Just beyond the back porch was an area dedicated to what looked like lawn decorations: towering limestone statues of various mythical figures- Marcel should know but did not; limestone benches and birdbaths full of standing water, moss, and leaves. Because of the statues and the porch, it was

concealed from view, and as he entered the semicircular enclosure, Marcel's stomach started going crazy. The music was muffled, and he and Nathaniel were alone.

'Go ahead,' he said, passing her the box. 'Open it.' He thought he might vomit. What if she hated it? Finally, she got the wrapping off, and she opened the little box and stood there staring at it: a dark cord of velvet and a small, crystal butterfly charm, light dazzling from its wings, resting neatly on a bunch of pieces of cotton.

She stared at it for so long, he thought she must hate it, and then he thought he really would be sick. The necklace had cost him three full days of the cash he got on stocking shelves.

'If you want to return it,' he started to say. But then she looked up and he saw that she was crying.

'It's beautiful,' she said. 'I love it.' And before he knew what was happening, she reached for him and drew him down to her and kissed him.

Her lips tasted like salt and tequila.

When she pulled back, he felt dizzy.

He had kissed girls before but not like that. Usually, he was too stressed about what their tongue was doing or whether he was using too much pressure or too little. But with Nathaniel, he forgot to think, or even breathe, and now his vision was clouded with black spots. 'Listen,' he blurted out. 'I want you to know I will still honor the split. If I win, I mean. You can still take your share of the money.' She stiffened suddenly as if he had slapped her. For a second, she stood there, rigid. Then she shoved the jewelry box back at him. 'I can't take this,' she said. 'I can't accept it.'

Marcel felt like he had just inhaled a bowling ball. 'What do you mean?' 'I mean I don't want it,' she said and forced the box into his hand. 'We are not together, okay? I mean, I like you and all but - I am seeing someone else. It is not right.' Cold, cold: washing his whole body.

He was freezing, confused, and furious. He did not feel like himself, did not sound like himself either, as he heard himself say, 'Who is it?' She had turned away from him. 'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'No one you know.'

'You kissed me,' he said. 'You kissed me, you made me think-' She shook her head. She still would not look at him. 'It was for the game. Okay? I wanted you to help me win. That is all.' That voice he did not recognize came out of his mouth again. 'I don't believe you.' The words sounded thin and flimsy.

She kept speaking as if he was not there. 'But I do not need Fear. I do not need you. I do not need Maggie.'

Kevin says I have potential in front of the camera. He says-' 'Kevin?' Something clicked in Marcel's brain, and his stomach opened. 'That scumbag you met at the mall?'

'He's not a scumbag.' Now she whirled around to face him. She was shaking. Her fists were bawled, and her eyes were bright and there was wetness on her cheeks, and it broke his heart. He still wanted to kiss her. He hated her...!

'He is legit. He believes in me. He said he would help me....' The cold in Marcel's chest had turned into a hard fist. He could feel it beating against his ribs, threatening to explode out through his skin. 'I'm sure he did,' he said, practically spitting.

'Let me guess. All you had to do was show him your tits-' 'Shut up,' she whispered.

‘Maybe let him feel you up for a while. Or did you have to spread your legs, too?’ As soon as he said it, he wished the words back into his mouth. Nathaniel stiffened as though a shock had run through her. And he could tell from her face-the guilt and the sadness and the sorrow that she did, she had.

‘Nathaniel.’ He could barely say her name. He wanted to say he was sorry, and he was sorry for her too, for what she had done. He wanted to tell her that he believed in her and thought she was beautiful.

‘Go away,’ she whispered.

‘Please.’ He started to reach for her.

She stumbled backward, nearly tripping on the grass. ‘Go,’ she said.

Her eyes looked at him for a minute. He saw two dark holes, like wounds; then she whirled around and was gone. Maggie JOH- JOHN HAD A TRAMPOLINE; OR AT LEAST, HE HAD A trampoline frame. The nylon had long ago disintegrated and been replaced with a heavy canvas tarp, stretched tautly.

Maggie was not surprised to find him there, hiding out from the rest of the guests. He had never been super social.

She was not either. It was one of the things that bonded them.

‘Having an appropriate time?’ she asked as she maneuvered onto the canvas next to him. Joh- John smelled like cinnamon and a little like butter.

He shrugged. When he smiled, his nose crinkled. ‘So-so. You?’ ‘So-so,’ she admitted. ‘How’s Lily doing?’ Maggie had had no choice but to bring her. They had installed her in the den,

and Joh- John had volunteered to check in on her when he went inside for more plastic cups.

‘She is fine... Watching a marathon of some celebrity show. I made her popcorn.’ He leaned back, so he was staring at the sky, and motioned for Maggie to do the same. When they were little, they sometimes slept out here, side by side in sleeping bags, surrounded by empty packages of chips and cookies.

One time, she had woken up and found a raccoon sitting on her chest. Joh- John had yelled to startle it away-but not before getting a picture. It was one of her favorite memories from childhood.

She could still remember what it felt like to wake up next to him, with dew covering their sleeping bags and soaking the canvas, their breath steaming in the air-they were so warm next to each other. Like they were in the only safe, good place in the world.

Now she unconsciously moved her head onto the hollow space between his chest and shoulder, and he wrapped one arm around her. His fingers grazed her bare arms, and her body felt suddenly fizzy and warm. She wondered how they must look from above: like two pieces of a puzzle fit neatly together.

‘Are you going to miss me?’ Joh- John asked suddenly.

Maggie’s heart gave a huge, awful thump like it wanted to leap out of her throat. She had been trying all summer to ignore the fact that Joh- John was going away to college. Now they had less than a month left. ‘Don’t be an idiot,’ she said, nudging him.

‘I’m serious.’ He shifted, withdrawing his arm from under her head, rolling over onto one elbow to face her. Casually, he slung his other arm over her waist. Her shirt was riding up and his hand was on her stomach- his tan skin against her pale, freckled belly-and her lungs were having trouble working properly.

It is Joh- John, she reminded herself.

It is just Joh- John. ‘I’m going to miss you so bad, Maggie,’ he said. They were so close; she could see a bit of fuzz clinging to one of his eyelashes; she could see individual spirals of color in his eyes. And his lips. Soft-looking. The perfect imperfectness of his teeth.

‘What about Avery?’ Maggie blurted. She did not know where the words came from. ‘Are you going to miss her, too?’

He drew back an inch, frowning. Then he sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. As soon as he was not touching Maggie anymore, she would have given anything to have his touch-back. ‘I’m not with Avery anymore,’ he said carefully. ‘We broke up.’

Maggie started. ‘Since when?’ ‘Does it matter?’ Joh- John looked annoyed. ‘Look, it was never a real thing, okay?’ ‘You just liked hooking up with her,’ Maggie said. She suddenly felt angry, and cold, and exposed. She sat up, tugging down her shirt. Joh- John was leaving her behind. He would find new girls- pretty, tiny girls like Avery-and he would forget all about her. It happened all the time.

‘Hey.’ Joh- John sat up too. Maggie would not look at him, so he reached out and forced her chin in his direction. ‘I am trying to talk to you, okay? I - I had to break up with Avery. I like - someone else. There is someone else. That is what I am trying to tell you. But it is complicated....’

He was staring at her so intensely; Maggie could feel the warmth between them.

She did not think. She just leaned in and closed her eyes and kissed him. It was like taking a bite of ice cream that has been sitting out just long enough: sweet, easy, perfect. She was not worried about whether she was doing it right, as she had been all those years ago, in the movie theater, when she could only think of the popcorn in her teeth.

She was simply there, inhaling the smell of him, of his lips, while the music thudded softly in the background and the cicadas swelled an accompaniment.

Maggie felt little bursts of happiness in her chest, as though someone had set off sparklers there.

Then, abruptly, he pulled away.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘Wait.’ And instantly, the sparklers in her chest were extinguished, leaving only a smoking black place. Just that one word and she knew: she had made a mistake.

‘I can’t-’ Suddenly he looked different-older, full of regret, like someone she barely knew. ‘I don’t want to lie to you, Maggie.’

She felt like she had swallowed something spoiled: there was a bad taste in her mouth, and her stomach was lashing. She felt her face begin to burn. It was not her. He was in love with someone else. And she would just shove her tongue down his throat like a lunatic. She had to crab-walk backward, away from him to the edge of the trampoline.

‘Stupid,’ she said. ‘It was stupid. Just forget it, okay? I do not know what I was thinking.’ For a second, he looked hurt. But she was too embarrassed to care. And then he frowned, and he just looked tired and a little irritated, like she was an unruly

child, and he was a patient father. She realized suddenly that that was how Joh- John saw her: as a kid. A kid sister.

‘Will you just sit down?’ he said in his tired-dad voice. His hair was sticking straight up-the hair equivalent of a scream.

‘It’s getting late,’ Maggie said, which it was not. ‘I must take Lily home. Mom will get worried.’ Lie on top of a lie. She did not know why she said it. Maybe because at that moment she wished for it wish that she were heading back to a real home with a normal mom who cared, instead of back to the car and the parking spot on Meth Row. She wished that she were small and delicate, like a special Christmas ornament that needed to be handled correctly. I wished that she were someone else.

‘Maggie, please,’ he said. The world was breaking up, shattering into colors-and she knew if she did not get out of there, she would start to cry. ‘Forget about it,’ she said. ‘Seriously. Would you? Just forget it ever happened.’ She only made it a few steps away before the tears started. She swiped them away quickly with the heel of a hand; she had to pass through a dozen old classmates to get to the house, including Matt’s best friend, and she would rather die than be the girl crying at her best friend’s birthday party.

Everyone would think she was wasted. Funny how people could be around you for so many years and be so off the mark. She went in through the back door, taking a second inside to stand, inhaling, trying to get control of herself. Weirdly, although Joh- John’s whole property was a junkyard, the house was clean, sparsely furnished, and always smelled like carpet cleaner. Maggie knew that Mr. Mark’s longtime girlfriend, Carol, considered the yard a lost cause. But the home was her place, and she was always scrubbing and straightening, and yelling at



Joh- John to take his dirty feet off the coffee table, for God's sake.

Even though the house had not been remodeled since the seventies, and still sported shag carpet and weird orange-and-white- checkered linoleum in the kitchen, it looked spotless.

Maggie's throat tightened again.

Everything was so familiar here: the Formica dining room table; the crack running along with the kitchen countertop; the curled photographs stuck to the fridge with magnets advertising dentists' offices and hardware stores. They were as familiar to her as any she had ever called her own. They were hers, and Joh- John had been hers, once.

But no more.

She could hear running water and muffled TV sounds from the den, where Lily was watching. She stepped into the darkened hall and noticed the bathroom door was partly open. A wedge of light lay thickly on the carpet. Now she could hear crying, over the sound of the water. She saw a curtain of dark hair appear and disappear quickly.

'Nathaniel?' Maggie swung the door open carefully. Water gushed from the faucet, and steam was drumming up from the porcelain bowl. The water must have been scalding, but Nathaniel was still scrubbing her hands and sniffing. Her skin was raw, red, and shiny like it had been burned.

'Hey.' Maggie forgot, for the moment, about her problems. She took a step into the bathroom. Instinctively, she reached out and shut off the faucet. Even the taps were hot.

'Hey- are you okay?'

It was a stupid thing to say. Nathaniel was not okay. She turned to Maggie. Her eyes were puffy, and her whole face looked weird and swollen, like bread that was rising wrong. 'It's not working anymore,' she said in a whisper.

'What isn't?' Maggie asked. She suddenly felt hyper-alert. She noticed the drip-drip-drip of the faucet, and Nathaniel's monstrously red hands, hanging like deflated balloons by her side. She thought of the way that Nathaniel always liked things even, straight down the middle.

How sometimes she showered more than once a day. The taps and tongue clicks.

The stuff she had mostly ignored because she was so used to it. Another blind spot between people.

'That's why I froze on the highway, you know,' Nathaniel went on. 'I just - glitched.' Her eyes were watery again. 'Nothing's working.' Her voice wavered. 'I don't feel safe, you know?'

'Come here,' Maggie said. She drew Nathaniel into a hug and Nathaniel continued crying, drunk, against her chest. She gripped Maggie tightly as if she worried, she might fall. 'Sh-hh,' Maggie murmured, repeatedly. 'Sh-hh. It is your birthday.'

But she did not say it would be okay. How could she? She knew that Nathaniel was right.

None of them was safe.

No more. Never again.

Marcel-

Marcel HEARD VOICES IN THE LIVING ROOM AS SOON as he opened the door and immediately regretted coming home

directly. It was just after eleven, and his first thought was that Ricky was over again.

He was not in the mood to deal with Ricky grinning like an idiot and Dayna blushing and trying to make things not awkward and all the time shooting Marcel dagger eyes like he was the one intruding. But then his mom called, 'Come in here, Marcel!' A man was sitting on the couch. His hair was graying, and he was wearing a rumpled suit, which matched his rumpled face.

'What?' Marcel said, barely looking at his mom. He did not even try to be polite. He was not going to play nice with one of his mom's dates.

His mom frowned.

'Marcel,' she said, drawing out his name, like a warning bell. 'You know Bill Kelly, don't you? Bill came over for a little bit of company.' She was watching Marcel closely, and he read a dozen messages in her eyes at once: Bill Kelly just lost his son, so if you are rude to him, I swear you will be sleeping on the streets...

Marcel felt suddenly like his whole body was made of angles and spikes, and he could not remember how to move it correctly. He turned jerkily to the man on the couch: Big Bill Kelly. Now he could see the resemblance to his son. The straw-colored hair running, in the father's case, to gray; the piercing blue eyes and the heavy jaw.

'Hi,' Marcel said. His voice was a croak. He cleared his throat. 'I was -am- I mean, we're all sorry to hear-'

'Thank you, son.' Mr. Kelly's voice was surprisingly clear. Marcel was glad he had been interrupted because he did not know what else he would have said. He was so hot he felt like

his face was about to explode. He had a sudden, hysterical impulse to shout out: I was there. I was there when your son died. I could have saved him.

He took a deep breath. The game was wearing on him. He was starting to crack. After what seemed like forever, Mr. Kelly's eyes passed away from Marcel, back to his mother. 'I should go, Sheila.' He stood up slowly. He was so tall he nearly grazed the ceiling with his head. 'I am going to Albany tomorrow. Autopsies were done. I do not expect any surprises, but -' He made a helpless gesture with his hands. 'I want to know everything. I will know everything.'

Sweat was picking up underneath Marcel's collar. It might have been his imagination, but he was sure Mr. Kelly's words were directed at him. He thought of all the Fear betting slips he had been collecting this summer. Where were they? Had he put them in his underwear drawer? Or left them out on his bedside table? Jesus. He had to get rid of them.

'Of course.'

Marcel's mom stood too. Now all three of them were standing, awkwardly, like they were in a play and had forgotten their lines. 'Say goodnight to Mr. Kelly, Marcel.'

Marcel coughed. 'Yeah. Sure. Look,

I am sorry again-'

Mr. Kelly stuck out his hand.

'God's works,' he said quietly. But Marcel felt that when Mr. Kelly shook his hand, he squeezed just a little too hard.

That was the night -Digging went to a party down at the gully and ended up with a cracked rib, two black eyes, and one of his teeth knocked out. Derek Klieg was drunk; that was the

excuse he gave afterward, but everyone knew it was deeper than that, and once the swelling in -Digging face went down, he told anyone who would listen how Derek had jumped him, threatened him, tried to get him to cough up the names and identities of the judges, and would not listen when -Digging insisted he did not know. It was an obvious violation of one of Fear's many unspoken rules. The announcer was off-limits. So were the judges.

Derek Klieg was immediately disqualified. He had forfeited his spot in the game, and his name was struck from the betting slips by morning. And Natalie, the last player eliminated, was back on.

SATURDAY,

JULY 30

Maggie,

MAGGIE WAS WOKEN BY SOMEONE RAPPING ON THE window. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, startled and momentarily disoriented. Sun was streaming through the windows of the Taurus.

Marcel was watching her through the windshield. Now that she was awake, everything came into sudden focus: the kiss with Joh- John and its botched end; Natalie crying in the bathroom; and now Marcel watching her, taking in the rumpled sheet and beaten-up cups from Dairy Queen in the passenger seat, the chip bags, and the flip-flops and the scattered clothing in the backseat.

Outside, Lily was barefoot and dressed in a bathing suit. Maggie opened the door and got out of the car. 'What are you doing here?' She was furious with him. He had violated an unspoken agreement.

When she had said, do not tell, she had also meant Do not come back. 'I tried calling you. Your phone was off.' If he could tell she was angry, he did not seem to care. Her phone. She had been powering down her phone as much as she could since she could only charge it when she worked at Anne's house.

Besides, she did not need to see the texts from her mom. But she realized she had brought it into Joh- John's kitchen last night to charge, and never retrieved it. Sh\*t. That meant going back for it.

Maggie had slept in her clothes- the same clothes she had worn to Nathaniel's party, including a tank top with sequins.

She crossed her arms over her chest.

'What's up?' He passed her a folded piece of paper. The newest betting slips. 'Nathaniel's back on. Derek was disqualified.' 'Disqualified?' Maggie repeated.

She had only heard of someone being disqualified from Terror once before, years earlier-one of the players was sleeping with a judge. It later turned out that the guy, Mickey Barnes, was not a judge, just pretending to be one so he could get laid. But it was too late. The player was replaced. Marcel shrugged. Behind him, Lily had overturned their bucket of water and was making rivers out of the dirt.

Maggie was glad she was not listening.

'Are you going to tell her?' He asked.

'You can,' she said. He looked at her again. Something shifted in his eyes. 'No, I can't.' They stood there for a second. Maggie wanted to ask him what had happened, but she felt too weird. She and Marcel were not exactly close-not like that,

anyway. She did not know what they were. She was not close to anyone.

‘The deal’s off,’ he said after a minute. ‘No splits.’

‘What?’ Maggie was shocked to hear Marcel say it. That meant he knew she knew about his deal with Nathaniel. Did he know about the deal she and Nathaniel had made? His eyes were almost gray, like a stormy sky.

‘We play the game how it was meant,’ he said, and for the first time, she was almost afraid of him. ‘Winner takes the pot.’

‘Why can’t I come in and see Joh- John?’ Lily was in a bad mood. She had been whining since she got up. She was too hot. She was dirty. The food that Maggie had for her-more tinned stuff, and a sandwich she had bought at the 7- Eleven- was gross. Maggie guessed that the adventure of being without a home (she could not bring herself to think of the word homeless), the newness of it, was wearing off. Maggie gripped the wheel, squeezing out her frustration through her palms. ‘I’m just running in for a second, Lily-belle,’ she said, forcing herself to sound cheerful. She would not snap; she would not scream. She would keep it together-all for Lily. ‘And Joh- John’s busy.’ She did not know if this was true- she had not been able to call and see whether Joh- John was even home, and part of her was hoping he was not.

She kept flashing back to the kiss, the moment of warmth and rightness - and then the way he had pulled away as the kiss had physically hurt him. I do not want to lie to you, Maggie.

Never had she been so humiliated in her life. What had possessed her? Thinking about it made her stomach hurt, made her want to drive to the ocean, and keep running straight into it.

But she needed her phone. She was going to have to suck it up and risk seeing him. She could even do damage control, explaining that she had not meant to kiss him so he would not think she was in love with him or something. Her stomach gave another lurch into her throat. She was not in love with Joh- John.

Was she...?

'I'll be back in ten,' she said. She had parked a little way-down the driveway, so if Joh- John was outside, he would not see her car and all the evidence that she was living inside it. The last thing she wanted was more pity for him. There was still evidence of the party in the yard: a few plastic cups, cigarette butts, a pair of cheap sunglasses swimming in a birdbath filled with mossy water. But everything was quiet. He was not home.

But before she could even make it to the front door, Joh- John appeared, carrying a trash bag. He froze when he saw her, and Maggie felt the last flicker of hope that things would be normal, that they could pretend last night had never happened fizzle out.

'What are you doing here?' he blurted out.

'I just came to get my phone.' Her voice sounded weird like it was being replayed on a bad sound system. 'Don't worry, I'm not staying.' She started to move past him, into the house.

He caught her arm. 'Wait.' There was something desperate about the way he was looking at her. He licked his lips.

'Wait-you don't-I have to explain.'

'Forget about it,' Maggie said.



‘No. I can’t-you have to trust me-’ Joh- John pushed a hand through his hair, so it stood up straight. Maggie felt like she could cry. His clown hair; his faded Rangers T-shirt and sweatpants spotted with paint; his smell. She had thought it was hers-she had thought he was hers-but all this time he had been growing up and hooking up and having secret crushes and becoming someone, she did not know. And she knew, looking at him holding a stupid bag of trash, that she was in love with him and always had been. Since the kiss, the first year. Even before that...

‘You don’t have to explain,’ she said and pushed past him into the house. It had been bright outside, and she was temporarily disoriented by the dark, and she took two unsteady steps toward the living room, where she could hear the fan going, as Joh- John flung open the door behind her.

‘Maggie,’ he said. Before she could respond, another voice called out. A girl’s voice.

‘Joh- John?’

Time stopped. Maggie froze, and Joh- John froze, and nothing moved except the black spots across Maggie’s eyes as her vision slowly adjusted; as she saw a girl float up out of the shadow, emerging from the darkness of the living room.

Weirdly, although they had gone to school together forever, Maggie did not immediately recognize Vivian Trevin. It was the shock of seeing her there, in Joh- John’s house, barefooted, holding a mug from Joh- John’s kitchen. As though she belonged.

‘Hey, Maggie,’ Vivian said, taking a sip from her mug. Over the rim, her eyes connected with Joh- John’s, and Maggie saw a warning there. Maggie turned to Joh- John. All she saw

was guilt: guilt all over him, like a physical force, like something sticky.

‘What are you doing here?’ Vivian asked, still casual.

‘Leaving,’ Maggie said. She threw herself forward, down the hall, and into the kitchen. She was fighting the feeling that she was going to be sick, fighting the memories threatening to drown her: the times she had drunk cocoa from that mug, her lips where Vivian’s now where her lips on Joh- John’s-Vivian’s Joh- John. Her phone was still plugged into an outlet near the microwave. Her fingers felt swollen and useless. It took her several tries before she could unplug it.

She could not face passing Joh- John and Vivian again, so she just hurtled out the back door, across the porch, and down into the yard. Idiot. She was such an idiot. She tasted tears before she knew she was crying.

Why would Joh- John go for her, Maggie? He was smart. He was leaving for college. Maggie was a nobody.

Nill...

As in zero. That is why Matt had dumped her too.

No one had ever told her this basic fact: not everyone got to be loved. It was like those stupid bell curves they had had to study in math class. There was the big, swollen, happy middle, a whale hump full of blissful couples and families eating around a big dining room table and laughing. And then, at the tapered ends, there were the abnormal people, the weirdos, freaks, and zeros like her.

She wiped away the tears with her forearm and took a few seconds to breathe and calm down before she returned to the car. Lily was picking at a mosquito bite on her big toe. She stared at Maggie suspiciously when Maggie got in the car.

'Did you see Joh- John?' Lily asked.

'No,' Maggie said and put the car in the drive.

Contented: 1

WEDNESDAY,

AUGUST 3

Marcel,

Marcel HAD LOST THE RECEIPT

FOR NATALIE'S NECKLACE, and instead had to pawn it for half of what he had paid. He needed the money. It was August 3; he was running out of time. He needed a car for the Joust.

A junkier would do-he was even thinking of buying one off Joh- John. So long as it drove.

He had just finished a shift at Lowe's when he got a text.

He hoped for a wild second it was Natalie; instead, it was from his mom.

'Meet us @ Cambria Memorial as soon as possible!! Dayna...'

Something bad had happened to Dayna.

He tried calling his mom's cell phone, and then Dayna's, and got no response. He barely registered the twenty-minute bus ride to Hudson.

He could not sit still. His legs were full of itching, and his heart was lodged underneath his tongue. His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Another text. This time, it was from an unknown number.

Time to go solo. Tomorrow night we will see what you are made of. He shut his phone, shoved it in his pocket. When he reached Cambria Memorial, he practically sprinted from the bus.

‘Marcel! Marcel!’ Dayna and his mom were standing outside, by the handicapped ramp. Dayna was waving frantically, sitting up as tall as she could in her chair. And she was grinning. They both were smiling so big, he could see all their teeth, even from a distance.

Still, his heart would not stop going as he jogged across the parking lot.

‘What?’ He was breathless by the time he reached them. ‘What is it? What happened?’

‘You tell him, Day,’ Marcel’s mom said, still smiling. Her mascara was smudged. She had been crying.

Dayna sucked in a deep breath. Her eyes were shining; he had not seen her look so happy since before the accident.

‘I moved, Marcel. I moved my toes.’ He stared at Dayna, then his mom, then Dayna again. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he finally burst out. ‘I thought something happened. I thought you were dead or something.’ Dayna shook her head. She looked hurt.

‘Something did happen.’ Marcel took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. He was sweating. He jammed on the hat again. Dayna was watching him expectantly. He knew he was being a d\*ick.

He exhaled. ‘That’s amazing, Day,’ he said. He tried to sound like he meant it. He was happy; he was just still wound

up from the trip over, from being so afraid. 'I'm proud of you.' He leaned down and hugged her. And he felt the tiniest convulsion in her body like she was holding in a sob.

Marcel's mom insisted they go out to eat to celebrate, even though they could not afford it, especially now with all the bills.

They ended up at an Applebee's outside Carp. Marcel's mom ordered a margarita with extra salt and nachos for the table to start. Nachos were Marcel's favorite, but he could not bring himself to eat. His mom kept prattling on about Bill Kelly: how Bill Kelly was so nice, so thoughtful, even though he was grieving; how Bill Kelly had set them up with the appointment and made a phone call on their behalf and blah, blah, blah.

Her cell phone rang in the middle of dinner. Marcel's mom stood up.

'Speak of the devil,' she said. 'It is Bill.'

He might have news...'

'What kind of news?' Marcel asked when she had stepped outside. He could see her pacing the parking lot. Under the glow of the lights, she looked old. Tired, saggy... more mom-like than normal.

Dayna shrugged.

'Are they screwing or something?' Marcel pressed. Dayna sighed and wiped her fingers carefully on her napkin. She had been picking apart her burger, layer by layer.

This was something she had always done: deconstruct her food, put it back together in a way that pleased her. With burgers it was lettuce and tomato on the bottom, then ketchup, then the burger, then bun.

‘They’re friends, Marcel,’ she said, and he felt a flicker of irritation. She was speaking to him in her grown-up voice, a voice that had always grated on him.

‘Why do you care, anyway?’

‘Mom doesn’t have friends,’ he said, even though he knew it was mean. Dayna set down her napkin-hard, in her fist, so that the water cups jumped.

‘What is up with you?’ Marcel stared at her. ‘What’s up with me?’ ‘Why do you have to give Mom such a tough time? That doctor is not cheap. She is trying.’ Dayna shook her head. ‘Ricky had to leave, like, his whole family to come here-’

‘Please don’t bring Ricky into this.’

‘I’m just saying, we should feel lucky.’

‘Lucky?’ Marcel barked a laugh. ‘Since when did you become such a guru?’

‘Since when did you become such a brat?’ Dayna fired back.

Marcel suddenly felt lost. He did not know where the feeling came from, and he struggled to get out from underneath it. ‘Moms clueless. That is all I am saying.’ He stabbed at his mac ‘n’ cheese to avoid meeting Dayna’s eyes. ‘Besides, I just don’t want you to get your hopes up....’

Now it was Dayna’s turn to stare.

‘You’re unbelievable.’ She spoke in a deep voice, and somehow that was worse than if she had been screaming. ‘All this time you have been telling me to keep trying, keep believing. And then I make progress-’ ‘And what about what I have been doing?’

Marcel knew he was being a brat, but he could not help it. Dayna had been on his side-she was the only one on his side and now, suddenly, she was not.

‘You mean the game?’ Dayna shook her head. ‘Look, Marcel. I have been thinking. I do not want you to play anymore.’

‘You what...?’ Marcel exploded; several people at a neighboring table turned to stare.

‘Keep your voice down.’ Dayna was looking at him the way she used to when he was a little kid and did not understand the rules of a game, she wanted to play disappointed, a little impatient. ‘After what happened to Bill Kelly - it is not worth it. It is not right.’ Marcel took a sip of his water and found he could barely work it down his throat. ‘You wanted me to play,’ he said. ‘You asked me to.’

‘I changed my mind,’ she said. ‘Well, that’s not how the game works,’ he said. His voice was rising again. He could not help it. ‘Or did you forget?’

Her mouth got thin: a straight pink scar on the face. ‘Listen to me, Marcel. This is for you for your good.’

‘I played for you.’ Marcel no longer cared about being overheard. The anger, the sense of loss, ate away the rest of the world, made him careless.

Whom did he have? He had no friends.

He had never stayed in a place long enough to make them or trust them.

With Maggie, he had thought he had gotten close, with Natalie, too. He had been wrong, and now even Dayna was turning on him.

‘Did you forget that, too? This is all for you. So that things can go back.’ He had not intended to say the last part- had not even thought- the words until they were out of his mouth. For a second there was silence. Dayna was staring at him, openmouthed, and the words sat between them like something detonated: everything had been blown wide open.

‘Marcel,’ she said. He was horrified to see that she looked like she felt sorry for him. ‘Things can never go back. You know that, right? That is not how it works. Nothing you do will change what happened.’ Marcel pushed his plate away. He stood up from the table. ‘I’m going home,’ he said. He could not even think.

Dayna’s words were making a storm inside his head. Things can never go back.

What had he been playing for, all this time?

‘Come on, Marcel,’ Dayna said.

‘Sit down.’ ‘I’m not hungry,’ he said. He could not bring himself to look at her: those patient eyes, the thin, dissatisfied set of her mouth. Like he was a little kid. A dumb kid. ‘Tell mom I said- goodbye.’

‘We’re miles from home,’ Dayna said.

‘I could use the walk,’ Marcel said. He shoved a cigarette in his mouth, even though he did not feel like smoking, and hoped it would not rain.

Maggie,

MAGGIE DIDN’T RETURN TO METH ROW. IT WAS CONVENIENT, in some ways, but there was no privacy in it now that Marcel knew where she was.



She did not want him to be spying on her, seeing how she was living, running his mouth about it. Maggie had been careful, thus far, to move the car only in the middle of the night, from the parking lot to the empty road to the parking lot, when there was less danger of being spotted. She had developed a routine: on workdays, she set her alarm for four a.m., and, while Lily was still sleeping, headed through the ink-black to

Anne's house...

She had found a break in the trees just off the driveway where she could park. Sometimes she slept again. Sometimes she waited, watching the black begin to blur and change, turning first to smudgy dark, then sharpening and splitting, peeling off into vivid purple shadows and triangles of light. She tried extremely hard not to think about the past, or what was going to happen in the future, or anything at all.

Later, when it was nine, she would walk up to the house, telling Anne that Joh- John had dropped her off. Sometimes Lily came with her. Sometimes she stayed in the car or played in the woods.

Twice, Maggie had arrived early and chosen to bathe, sneaking through the woods to the outdoor shower. Then she had stripped, shivering in the cool air, and stepped gratefully under the stream of hot water, letting it run into her mouth and eyes and over her body. Otherwise, she would have been making do with a hose. Maggie had to stop herself from fantasizing about running water, microwaves, air conditioners, refrigerators, and toilets.

Toilets...

It had been two weeks since she had left her mom's, and she had gotten two mosquito bites on her butt while peeing

at six a.m. and eaten colder canned ravioli than she could stomach.

What she wanted to do was make it to Malden Plaza, where they had crossed the highway to that vast, impersonal parking lot with only a few streetlamps. Truckers came on and off the highway all the time, and cars stayed in the lot overnight. There was a McDonald's, and public restrooms, with showers for the truckers who passed through.

First, they needed gas. It was not yet dark, and she did not want to stop in Carp.

But she had been running on fumes for twenty-four hours, and she did not want to break down, either.

So, she pulled into the Citgo on Main Street, which was the least popular of the three gas stations in town because it was the most expensive and did not sell beer.

'Stay in the car,' she told Lily.

'Yeah, yes,' Lily mumbled.

'I'm serious, Billy.' Maggie was not sure how long she could take this: the sniping, the back-and-forth. She was losing it. Cracking up. Grief had its hands around her neck; she was choking. She kept seeing Vivian sipping from Joh- John's mug, her black hair hanging in wisps around a pretty, moon-white face. 'And don't talk to anybody, okay?'

She scanned the parking lot: no police cars, no cars she recognized. That was a good sign. Inside, she put down twenty dollars for gas and took the opportunity to stock up on whatever she could: packages of ramen soup, which they would eat dissolved in chilly water; chips and salsa; beef jerky; and two fresh-ish sandwiches.

The man behind the counter, with a dark, flat face and thinning hair slicked to one side, like weeds strapped to his forehead, made her wait for change. While he counted singles into the register, she went to the bathroom.

She did not like standing under the bright lights of the store, and she did not like the way the man was looking at her either- like he could see through to all her secrets.

While she was washing her hands, she dimly registered the jangle of the bell above the door, the low murmur of conversation. Another customer. When she left the bathroom, he was blocked from view by a big display of cheap sunglasses, and she was at the counter before she noticed his uniform, the gun strapped to his hip.

A police officer...

‘How’s that Kelly business going?’ the man behind the counter was saying. The police officer with a big belly pushing out over his belt shrugged. ‘Autopsy came in. Turns out Little Kelly did not die in that fire.’

Maggie felt like something had hit her in the chest. She tugged her hood up and pretended to be looking for chips. She picked up a package of pretzels, squinted at it hard.

‘That right?’

‘Sad story. It looks like OD. He had been taking pills since he came back from the war. Probably just went to that Graybill house for a nice warm place to get high.’

Maggie exhaled. She felt an insane, immediate sense of relief. She had not realized, until now, that she had held herself accountable, at least a little bit, for his murder.

But it was not murder. It had not been.

‘Still, someone started that fire,’ the police officer said, and Maggie realized she had been staring at the same package of pretzels for several seconds too long, and now the police officer was staring at her. She shoved the pretzels back on their rack, ducked her head, and headed for the door.

‘Hey! Hey, miss!’

She froze.

‘You forgot your groceries. I got change for you too.’

If she bolted, it would look suspicious. Then the police officer might wonder why she had freaked. She turned slowly back to the counter, keeping her eyes trained on the ground. She could feel both men staring at her as she collected the bag of food. Her cheeks were hot, and her mouth felt dry as sand. She was at the door again, in the clear, when the police officer called out to her.

‘Hey.’ He was watching her closely. ‘Look at me.’ She forced her eyes up to his. He had a pudgy, doughy-like face. But his eyes were big and round, like a small kid’s, or an animal’s.

‘What’s your name?’ He spoke. She said the first name that came to her: ‘Vivian.’

He moved gum around in his mouth.

‘How old are you, Vivian? You in high school?’

‘Graduated,’ she said. Her palms were itching. She wanted to turn and run. His eyes were traveling around her face quickly like he was memorizing it.

The police officer took a step closer to her.

‘You ever heard of a game called Terror,

‘Vivian?’

She looked away. 'No,' she said in a whisper. It was a stupid lie, and immediately she wished she had said yes.

'I thought everybody played Fear,' the police officer said.

'Not everyone,' she said, turning back to him. She saw a spark of triumph in his eyes, as though she had admitted to something. God. She was messing this up. The back of her neck was sweating. The police officer stared at her for a few more beats. 'Go on, get out of here,' was all he said. Outside, she took a few deep breaths. The air was thick with moisture. A storm was coming-a bad one too, judging from the sky. It was green like the universe was about to get sick. She shoved her hood back, letting the sweat cool off her forehead. She jogged across the parking lot to the pump.

And stopped.

Lily was gone. There was a resonant boom, a sound so loud she jumped. The sky opened, and rain hissed angrily against the pavement. She reached the car just as the first fork of lightning tore across the sky. She jiggled the door handle. Locked. Where was Lily?

'Maggie!' Lily's voice rang out over the rain.

Maggie turned. A police officer was standing next to a blue-and-white patrol car. He had his hand on her sister's arm. 'Lily!' Maggie ran over, forgetting to be worried about police officers or being careful. 'Let go of her,' she said.

'Calm down, calm down.' The police officer was tall and skinny, with a face like a mule. 'Everyone be calm, okay?'

'Let go of her,' Maggie repeated. The police officer obeyed, and Lily barreled over to Maggie, wrapping her arms around Maggie's waist like she was a little kid.

‘Hold on now,’ the police officer said. Lightning flashed again. His teeth were lit up, gray, and crooked. ‘I just wanted to make sure the little lady was okay.’ ‘She’s fine,’ Maggie said. ‘We’re fine.’ She started to turn away, but the police officer reached out and stopped her.

‘Not so fast,’ he said. ‘We still have a slight problem.’

‘We didn’t do anything,’ Lily piped up.

The police officer squinted at Lily. ‘I believe you,’ he said, his voice a little softer. ‘But that right there,’ -and he pointed to the beat-up Taurus- ‘is a stolen car.’

The rain was coming down so hard, Maggie could not think. Lily looked sad and extra skinny with her T-shirt stuck to her ribs.

The police officer opened the back door of the squad car. ‘Go on and get in,’ he said to Lily. ‘Dry off.’ Maggie did not like it; she did not want Lily anywhere near the police car. That is how they got you: they were- were nice, and they lured you into thinking you were- were safe, and then they flipped the tables without warning. She thought of Joh- John and felt her throat squeeze. That was how everyone got you.

But Lily had scooted inside before

Maggie could say, do not.

‘How about we go somewhere and

talk?’ The police officer said. At least he did not sound mad.

Maggie crossed her arms. ‘I’m fine,’ she said, hoping he would not see her shiver. ‘And I didn’t steal that car,’ she said. ‘It’s my mom’s car.’ He shook his head. ‘Your mom said you

stole it.' She could barely hear him in the rain. 'You got quite the setup in the back seat. Food. Blankets.

Clothes.' A bead of rain rolled off the tip of his nose, and Maggie thought he looked as pathetic as Lily had. She looked away. She felt the need to tell, to spill, to explain, swelling like a balloon inside her chest, pressing painfully against her ribs. But she just said, 'I am not going home. You cannot make me.'

'Sure, I can.'

'I'm eighteen,' she said. 'With no job, no money, no home,' he said.

'I have a job.' She knew she was being stupid, stubborn, but she did not care. She had promised Lily they would not go back, and they would not. Probably if she told her mom, talked about the partying and the drugs, she would not have to go back. But they would stick her mom in jail and put Lily in some home with strangers who did not care about her. 'I have an excellent job.'

And suddenly it occurred to her:

Anne. She looked at the police officer. 'Don't I get one phone call or something?' For the first time, he smiled. But his eyes were still sad. 'You're not under arrest.'

'I know,' she said. She was suddenly so nervous, she felt like she would vomit. What if Anne did not care? Or worse, sided with the police? 'But I want my phone call, just the same.' Marcel HAD ONLY MADE IT HALFWAY HOME WHEN THE sky split open and it began to pour. Just his freaking luck. Within a few minutes, he was soaked.

A car passed, blaring its horn, sending a fierce spray of water across its jeans. He was still two miles from home. He was hoping the storm would let up, but it got worse.

Lightning ripped across the sky, quick flashes that gripped the world in the weird green glow. Water accumulated fast in the ditches, driving leaves and paper cups onto his shoes.

He was blind; he could not see the oncoming traffic until it was on top of him. He realized, suddenly, that he was only a few minutes away from Joh- John's. He turned off the road and started jogging. With any luck, Joh- John would be home, and he could wait it out or bum a ride.

But when he came up the driveway, he saw the whole house was dark. Still, he went up to the porch and knocked on the front door, praying that Joh- John would answer. Nothing. He remembered the back porch was screened in and circled the house through the slog of mud. He banged his shin against an old lawnmower and went stumbling forward, face planting, cursing.

The screen door was, of course, locked. He was wet and so miserable he briefly considered punching a hole through it- but then lightning bit through the sky again, and in that half-second of unnatural brightness, he saw a kind of gardening shed, some little ways back and half-obscured by the trees. The door to the shed was protected by a padlock, but Marcel had his first bit of luck: the lock was not in place. He pushed into the shed and stood to shiver in the sudden dryness and coolness, inhaling the smell of wet blankets and old wood, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He could not see sh\*t. Just outlines, dark objects, more junk.

He pulled out his cell phone for light and saw the battery was out.



He could not even call Joh- John and ask where he was and when he would be home. Great. But at least in the glow of the screen, he could make a better scan of the shed, and he was surprised to see that it was wired: a plain bulb was screwed into the ceiling, and there was a switch on the wall, too.

The bulb was dim, but it was better than nothing. Immediately he saw that the shed was better organized than he had thought.

Certainly, cleaner than the junkyard. There was a stool and a desk and a bunch of shelves. A bunch of betting slips, water-warped and weighed down with a metal turtle, were piled on the desk.

Next to the betting slips was a pile of old A/V and recording equipment, and one of those cheap pay-per-use cell phones, the kind that required no subscription. His second piece of luck: the cell phone powered on and did not require a password.

He looked in his contacts for Joh- John's cell phone number and managed to retrieve it just before his cell went dead. He thumbed it into the keypad of the cell phone he had found and listened to it ring. Five times, then Joh- John's voicemail. He hung up without leaving a message. Instead, he flipped over to the texts, planning to shoot off a 911 to Joh- John. He had to come home sometime.

Where could he be in this weather, anyway?

And then: he froze. The driving of the rain on the roof, even the weight of the cell phone-all of it receded, and he saw only the words of the last outgoing text.

Time to go unaccompanied...

Tomorrow night we will see what you are made of.

He read it again, and a third time.

The feeling returned in a rush. He scrolled down. More texts: instructions for the game. Messages to other players. And at the very bottom, a text to Maggie's number.

Quit now, before you get hurt. Marcel replaced the phone carefully, exactly where it had been.

Now everything looked different: recording equipment. Cameras... Spray paint stacked in the corner, and plywood leaning against the shed walls. All the stuff Joh- John had needed for the challenges.

A half-dozen mason jars were lined up on one shelf; he bent down to examine them and then cried out, stumbling away, nearly upsetting a stack of plywood.

Spiders... The jars were full of them -crawling up the glass, deep brown bodies blurring together. Meant for him.

'What are you doing here?' Marcel spun around. His heart was still beating hard; he was imagining the feel of a hundred spiders on his skin. Joh- John was standing in the doorway, totally- immobile.

The storm was still raging behind him, sending down sheets of water. He was wearing a hooded rain poncho, and his face was in shadow. For a second, Marcel was truly afraid of him; he looked like a serial killer in some bad horror movie.

Marcel had a sudden flash of clarity: this was what the game was about. This was what true fear was that you could never know other people, not completely. That you were always just guessing blind. Then Joh- John took another step into the shed, shoving off his hood, and the impression passed. It was just Joh- John.

Some of Marcel's fear eased too, although his skin was still prickling, and he was uncomfortably aware of the spiders in their thin glass jars, only a few feet away.

'What the hell, Marcel?' Joh- John burst out. His fists were balled up.

'I was looking for you,' Marcel said, raising both hands, just in case Joh- John was thinking of swinging at him.

'I just wanted to get out of the rain.' 'You're not supposed to be in here,' Joh- John insisted. 'It's all right,' Marcel said. 'I know, okay? I already know.' There was a minute of electric silence. Joh- John stared at him. 'Know what?' he said at last.

'Come on, man. Do not bullsh\*t,' Marcel said quietly. 'Just tell me one thing: why?

Why?

I thought you hated- Fear.' Marcel thought Joh- John might not answer, might still try to deny the whole thing. Then his body seemed to collapse like someone had pulled the drain in his center. He tugged the door closed behind him, then sagged into the chair. For a moment, he sat with his head in his hands. Finally- he looked up.

'Why did you play?' he asked.

Revenge, Marcel thought, and Because I have nothing else. But aloud he said, 'Money. Why else?' Joh- John gestured wide with his hands.

'Same...'

'Really...?'

Marcel watched him closely. There was a look on Joh- John's face he could not identify. Joh- John nodded, but Marcel could tell he was lying. It was more than that. He chose to let it go.

Everyone needed secrets...

'So-o what now?' Joh- John asked. He sounded exhausted. He looked exhausted too. Marcel realized how much it must have weighed on him this summer-all the planning, all the lies.

'You tell me,' Marcel said. He leaned back against the desk. He was feeling slightly more relaxed, and grateful that Joh- John was positioned so that he could no longer see the spiders.

'You can't tell Maggie,' Joh- John said, sitting forward, suddenly wild.

'She can't know about this all.'

'Calm down,' Marcel said. His mind was ticking forward, already adjusting to the added information, thinking of how he could use it. 'I am not going to tell Maggie. But I am not going to do the solo challenge either. You are just going to say I did.' Joh- John stared at him. 'That's not fair.'

Marcel shrugged. 'Not. But that is how it is going to go.' He wiped his palms on his jeans. 'What were you planning to do with those spiders?' 'What do you think?' Joh- John sounded annoyed. 'All right. Fine.'

You will go straight to Joust. Okay?' Marcel nodded. Abruptly, Joh- John stood up, kicking the chair so it scooched forward a few inches. 'Jesus.'

Do you know, I am glad you found out? I was almost hoping you would. It has been awful. Freaking awful.' Marcel did not say anything stupid, like that Joh- John could have said no when he was approached about being a judge.

So, he just said, 'It'll be over soon.' Joh- John was pacing. Now he whirled around to face Marcel. Suddenly he filled the whole space. 'I killed him, Marcel,' he said, choking a little. 'I'm responsible.'

A muscle flexed in Joh- John's jaw; it occurred to Marcel that he was trying not to cry. 'It was part of the game.' He shook his head. 'I never meant to hurt anyone. It was a stupid trick. I lit some papers in a trash can. But the fire got out of control so quickly. It just - exploded.

I did not know what to do.'

Marcel felt a moment of guilt.

Earlier tonight, when he had gone off on Dayna about Bill Kelly, he had not been thinking of Little Kelly at all. And about how awful his father must feel. 'It was an accident,' he said softly.

'Does it matter?' Joh- John asked. His voice was strangled. 'I should go to jail. I will.'

'You will not. Nobody knows.' It occurred to Marcel, though, that Joh- John must have a partner. There were always at least two judges. He knew that Joh- John would not tell him if he asked, though. 'And I will not say anything. You can trust me.'

Joh- John nodded. 'Thanks,' he whispered. Again, the energy left him at once. He sat down again and put his head in his hands. They stayed like that for a long time, while the rain drummed on the roof, like fists beating to get in.

They stayed until Marcel's leg started to get numb where he was leaning on it, and the noise of the rain receded slightly and became the light scratching of nails.

'I have a favor to ask you,' Joh- John said, looking up. Marcel nodded.

Joh- John's eyes flashed: an expression gone too quickly to interpret.

'It's about Maggie,' he said.

SATURDAY,

AUGUST 6

Maggie,

ANNE HAD DECIDED THAT MAGGIE WAS READY TO FEED the white Bengal's. She had shown Maggie how to unlock the pen and where to place the bucket of meat. Anne took her time doing it sometimes, she even wound up and threw a steak, like a player hurling a Frisbee, and occasionally one of the white Bengals would snap it up in midair.

Maggie always waited until the White Bengal's were on the other side of the pen or lying underneath the trees, where they liked to spend the sunniest afternoons. She worked as quickly as possible, never taking her eyes off them. The whole time she could practically feel the heat of their breath, the sharp rip of their teeth in her neck.

'Do you think they miss home?' Maggie turned around. Lily. Earlier that morning, Lily had helped Anne wrestle Muppet into a bath, and her legs were spotted with muddy water. But she looked cleaner, healthier than she had in weeks. From the other side of the barn, they could hear Anne humming as she pulled daffodils from the garden.

‘I think they’re pretty happy,’ Maggie said, although she had never really thought about it one way or another. She triple-checked that she had locked the pen, then turned once again to Lily. Lily’s face was puckered like she was trying to swallow something too big.

‘What about you, Bill?’ she asked, resting a hand briefly on Lily’s head.

‘Do you miss home?’

Lily shook her head so hard her braid whipped her in the face. ‘I want to stay here forever,’ she said, and Maggie knew that the words had been the too-big thing that was choking her.

Maggie had to bend down awkwardly to hug Lily. Still, Lily was growing; she was on Maggie’s chest. It was just one more thing that had changed while Maggie was not paying attention. Like Joh- John.

Like her friendship with Nathaniel.

‘No matter what, we will be together. Okay? We will be fine.’ Maggie put her thumb on Lily’s nose, and Lily swatted at her. ‘Do you believe me?’ Lily nodded, but Maggie could tell that she did not, not entirely.

It had been three days since Maggie had been picked up by the police officers, and for now, Anne had agreed to let Maggie and Lily stay with her. They were sleeping in the ‘blue room:’ wallpaper patterned with blue posies, blue coverlets, ruffled blue curtains.

Maggie thought it was the most beautiful room she had ever seen. Earlier that morning, she had woken up and Lily’s bed had been empty. For a moment, she was seized with fear, until she heard laughter from outside. When she went to the

window, she saw Lily was helping Anne feed the chickens and laughing hysterically as one of them chased her, picking up the feed. The day before, Krista had arrived in the Taurus, which the police officers had returned to her. She refused even to acknowledge Anne but made a big show of embracing Lily, who stood rigidly, her face squashed against Krista's sun freckled chest. Maggie had expected her to be angry about the car, and she was, but she was sober, at least, and trying to put on a good show. She reeked of perfume, and she was wearing her work pants and a blue blouse that puckered under her boobs.

She told Maggie she was sorry, and she was not partying anymore, and she was going to do a better job of paying attention to Lily. But she recited the words stiffly, like an actor reading lines that bored her.

'So? Are you going to come home?' She spoke.

Maggie shook her head. And then she had seen it: Krista's face had, for just a minute, transformed.

'You can't stay here forever,' Krista said in a deep voice, so Anne could not hear. 'She'll get sick of you.'

Maggie felt something open deep in her stomach. 'Good-bye, Krista,' she said.

'And I will not let you take my baby, either. Do not think you are taking Lily from me.' Krista had reached out and grabbed Maggie's elbow, but seeing Anne move toward them, had quickly released it.

'I'll be back soon,' Krista said loudly with her plastic smile. The words were like a threat. And Maggie had walked around for the rest of the day with that pit in her stomach, even after Anne had approached, unexpectedly, unasked, and given Maggie a big hug.



Do not worry, she had said. I am here for you. Maggie wished she could honestly believe it.

The White Bengal's had moved across the pen now, toward the meat-lazily at first, as though uninterested. They sprang on it in one quick, fluid motion, jaws opening, teeth gleaming momentarily in the sun. Maggie watched them tear into it and felt a little queasy. What had Anne said on her first day of work? She liked taking in broken and damaged things.

Nonetheless, Maggie could not imagine the White Bengals needing help. Her phone buzzed in her back pocket. Natalie... they had not spoken since her birthday.

'Maggie?' Natalie's voice sounded distant, as though she were speaking from underwater. 'Did you see the newest?'

'Newest what?' Maggie asked.

Cradling the phone between her ear and shoulder, she shoved open the door to the tool shed and replaced the keys with the white Bengal pen.

'The betting slips,' Natalie said.

-And-

'Marcel beat his solo challenge. Spiders.' She paused. 'One of us is next.'

Maggie's stomach gave another twist. 'Or Ray. Or Harold Lee,' she pointed out.

'But it'll be our turn soon,' Nathaniel said. She paused. 'Have you - have you spoken to him?' Maggie knew right away that Nathaniel was talking about Marcel. 'Not really,' she said. She had not told Natalie about what Marcel had said: that their deal was off. She suspected that Nathaniel knew as much. Nathaniel sighed. 'Let me know, okay?'

‘Yeah, sure,’ Maggie said. There was an awkward pause. She remembered how hysterical Nathaniel had been in the bathroom the other night, with her hands scraped raw from scrubbing. She felt a sudden wave of emotion-love for Natalie, grief for all the things that were never said.

‘And Maggie?’ Nathaniel said.

‘What’s up?’

Nathaniel’s voice was quiet. ‘I could not have done this without you. I would never have gotten this far. You know that, right?’

‘The game’s almost done,’ Maggie said, trying to keep her voice light.

‘Don’t turn melty on me now.’ As soon as she hung up, she saw she had missed a text. She clicked over to her messages and felt her breath stick in her mouth.

-Then-

Tomorrow it is your turn, the message read.

SUNDAY,

AUGUST 7

Maggie,

‘ARE YOU OKAY?’ NATHANIEL ASKED.

‘I’d be better if you’d stop jerking the wheel,’ Maggie said. Then, immediately: ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s all right,’ Nathaniel said. Her knuckles were tiny half-moons on the wheel. As soon as Maggie saw the sign for Fresh Pines Mobile Park, she felt like her stomach might drop

out of her butt. They were headed to Lot 62, only a few rows down from Krista's house.

Even though no one had lived there for ages, it was wired and fitted with a fridge, a table, and a bed.

Maggie knew that people used Lot 62, which had been empty for as long as she could remember, for partying and for other stuff she did not want to think about. Once, when she was eight or nine, she and Joh- John had gone on a rampage there, emptying all the beers in the fridge, shaking the cigarette packs and bags of weed they found in the cupboards into the trash cans-like that would stop anyone.

Maggie wondered what Joh- John was doing right now, and whether he had heard it was her turn for a challenge.

Not... then she found that thinking of him was too painful, so she forced herself to concentrate on Natalie's awful driving.

'At least you're getting it over with,' Nathaniel said. Maggie knew she was trying to be helpful. 'I almost wish it were my turn.'

'No, you don't,' Maggie said. Already, they were at Lot 62. The shades were pulled, but she could see light glowing in the windows, and people turned to silhouettes inside.

Great... so- she would have an audience, too. Natalie cut the engine. 'You're going to be great,' she said. She started to get out of the car.

'Hey.' Maggie stopped her. Her mouth was dry. 'You know what you said earlier? Well, I could never have gotten this far without you, either.'

Part: 11

Nathaniel smiled, she looked so-o sad. 'May the best girl win,' she said softly. Inside, the air was hazy with cigarette smoke. -Digging was back, his face still swollen and shiny, patterned all over with bruises. He was showing off his injuries like they were badges of honor. Maggie was annoyed to see that Ray had come to watch her fail.

There were a few cheap bottles of liquor and some plastic cups on the counter. A group of people was sitting around the table; as Maggie and Nathaniel entered, they turned around as one.

Maggie's heart stopped. Vivian Trevin had come.

-And-

So, had Matt Hefley.

'What are you doing here?' She directed the question to Matt. She did not move from the doorway. She kept thinking that this was part of the test- like a setup.

Terror challenge: see how long Maggie can last without crying in a small trailer with her ex-boyfriend and Joh- John's new girl. Bonus points for not vomiting. Matt stood up from the table so quickly, he nearly overturned his chair.

'Maggie. Hey.' He waved awkwardly like they were standing at a distance instead of five feet from each other.

Maggie could feel Vivian watching her, looking slightly amused. B\*tch. And Maggie had never been anything but nice to her. '-Digging asked me to come. For help with -' He trailed off.

'With what?' Maggie felt cold.

~\*~

She could not feel her mouth, even as it made words. Matt turned a deep red. Maggie used to like that about him-how he was an easy blush. Now she thought he just looked stupid. 'With the gun,' he said finally.

For the first time, Maggie became aware of the object on the table, around which everyone had gathered. Her breath froze in her throat, becoming a hard block.

She could not swallow, not a pack of cards: a gun. The gun-the one Maggie had stolen from Trigger-Happy Jack's place. But no, that was impossible. She was losing it. Joh- John had taken the gun and locked it away in his glove box.

Maggie was not sure she could tell the difference between guns, anyway. They all looked the same: like horrible metal fingers, pointing the way to something evil.

She remembered, suddenly, listening as a small child while Krista was drinking with the neighbors in the kitchen. 'Now Maggie's father - he was a mess. Offed himself right after the baby came along. Came home and found his brain splattered on the wall.' Pause. 'Can't say I blame him, sometimes.'

'Please...?'

Just for a minute?' Matt had come even closer. He was staring at Maggie with his big cow eyes, pleading; she belatedly registered that he had asked her whether they could talk. He lowered his voice. 'Outside?'

'No.' Everything Maggie thought was taking a long time to turn into words, into action.

'What...?' Matt looked momentarily confused. He was not used to having Maggie stand up for herself. Delaney always said yes to him too.

‘If you want to talk, you can talk to me here.’ Maggie was aware that Nathaniel was doing her best to pretend she was not listening. Vivian, on the other hand, was still staring at her.

Matt coughed. He blushed again.

‘Look, I just wanted to tell you - I am sorry. Everything happened between us. The Delaney thing-’ He looked away. He was doing his best to seem apologetic, but Maggie knew that he was gloating, just a little bit, to be in the position of having to apologize. He was in control.

He shrugged...

‘You have to believe, it just kind of - happened.’ She felt a rush of hatred for him. How had she ever believed she was in love with him? He was a dolt, just like Nathaniel said.

At the same time, an image of Joh- John rose in her mind: Joh- John in his stupid sweatpants and flip-flops, grinning at her; sharing an iced coffee, sharing the same straw, mindless of backwash and the fact that Maggie always chewed her straws to bits; lying side by side on the hood of his car, surrounded by crushed cans, which Joh- John said would make the aliens more likely to abduct them. Saying, please, please, take me away from here, alien friends! And laughing.

‘Why are you telling me this now?’ Maggie said.

Matt looked startled, as though he had expected her to thank him. ‘I am telling you now because you do not have to do this. You do not have to go through with it. Look, I know you, Maggie. And this is not you.’

She felt like she had been soaked in the stomach. ‘You think this is about you? About what happened?’ Matt sighed.

She could tell he thought she was being difficult. 'I'm just saying you don't have to prove anything.'

A vibration went through Maggie -tiny electrical pulses of anger. 'Freak off, Matt,' she said. By now, the people in the room were no longer pretending not to be listening. But she did not care.

'Maggie-' He reached for her arm as she started to move past him.

She shook him off. 'This was never about you.' That was not, she realized, 100 percent true. She had entered at least, she thought she had-out of a sense of desperation, a sense that her life was over when he dumped her.

But she was playing for herself now, for herself and Lily; she was playing because she had made it this far; she was playing because if she won, it would be the first and only time she had ever won something in her life. 'And you do not know me. You never did.' He let her go. She was hoping he would leave, now that he had come to say what he had to say, but he did not.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the bathroom door, or the sheet of graffiti-printed plywood where the bathroom door should have been because the plumbing lines had not been connected. Just for a second, she saw Matt Hefley and Ray Hanrahan exchange glances. Imperceptibly, Matt gestured to him.

Like, I did what I could. She felt a twin surge of disgust and triumph. So now Ray was enlisting Matt's help to get Maggie to drop out. It was Ray who had sent her that text in June telling her to quit Fear. He thought she was a real threat.

And that made her feel powerful.

‘What is this...?’ she said, gesturing with her chin to the gun. Her voice was overloud, and she was aware that everyone was watching her-Matt, Ray, Nathaniel, Vivian, and all the rest of them. It was like a painting; and at the center, framed in light, was the gun.

‘Russian roulette.’ -Digging sounded almost apologetic. He added quickly, ‘You only must pull the trigger once.’

‘Harold had to do it too.’

‘But Harold didn’t do it.’ Vivian spoke up. Her voice was deep and slow and reminded Maggie of warmer places.

Places where it never rained.

She forced herself to meet Vivian’s eyes. ‘So, Harold is out?’

Vivian shrugged. ‘Guess so.’ She had one foot on the chair, knee up to her chest, and she fiddled unconcernedly with the necklace she was wearing.

Maggie could see her collarbones protruding from her tank top. Like baby bird bones. She had an image of Joh- John kissing that spot and looked away. So, Harold was out. That left just four players.

‘All right,’ she said. She could hardly swallow. ‘All right,’ she repeated. She knew she should get it over with, but her hands would not move from her sides. Nathaniel was staring at her, horrified, as though Maggie was already dead.

‘Is it loaded?’ someone asked. ‘It’s loaded.’ It was Ray who answered. ‘I checked.’ But even he looked queasy, and he would not meet Maggie’s eyes.

Do not be afraid, she told herself. But it had the opposite effect. She was rooted, paralyzed with fear. How many



chambers were in a gun? What were her chances? She had always been crapping at things like that-probability.

She kept hearing her mom's voice: Came home and found his brain splattered on the wall... She had no choice unless she wanted the game to end here, now. Then what would Lily do? But what would happen to Lily if Maggie blew her brains out? She saw her hand leave her side and reach for the gun. Her hand looked pale and foreign, like some weird creature you would find living in the ocean.

Behind her, Nathaniel gasped. Suddenly the door flew open behind them, with such force that it banged hard against the wall. Everyone turned simultaneously, as though they were all puppets on the same string.

Marcel,

Maggie felt immediately disappointed; she knew that deep down; she had been hoping for Joh- John.

'Hey,' she said. But Marcel did not answer. He just crossed the small space toward her, shoving Matt out of the way.

'It was you,' he said. His voice was low and full of spite.

Maggie blinked. 'What?' 'You told someone about the spiders,' he said. He glared at Natalie next. 'Or you did.'

Ray snickered. Marcel ignored him.

'What are you talking about?' It had not occurred to Maggie to wonder how the judges had known about

Marcel's fear of spiders. But now she did. How did they know about any of them? Her stomach tightened, and she was worried she might throw up.

‘Neither of us said anything,

Marcel, I promise.’ That was Natalie. Marcel stared at each of them in turn. Then, unexpectedly, he reached out and seized the gun. Several people gasped and ducked like he expected Marcel to start firing.

‘What are you doing?’ Vivian said.

Marcel did something with the gun -opened the chamber, Maggie thought, although his fingers moved so quickly, she could not be sure. Then he replaced it on the table.

‘I wanted to be sure it was loaded,’ he announced.  
‘Fair’s fair.’

Now he would not look at Maggie at all.

He just crossed his arms and waited.

‘Poor Marcel,’ Ray said. He did not bother to stifle a laugh. ‘Afraid of itsy-bitsy spiders.’

‘Your turn’s coming, Hanrahan,’ Marcel said calmly. This made Ray stop laughing.

The room got quiet. Maggie knew there would be no more interruptions. No more distractions. She felt as though someone had turned the lights on. It was too hot, too bright. She took the gun. Maggie heard Nathaniel say, ‘Please.’ Maggie knew that everyone was still watching her, but she could make out no individual faces: everyone had been transformed into vague blobs, suggestions of color and angles. Even the table began to blur.

The only real thing was the gun: heavy and cold. She fumbled a little to get her finger on the trigger. She could not feel her body anymore from the waist down. This was what it was like to die: a slow numbing.

She placed the gun to her temple, felt the cool bite of metal on her skin, like a hollow mouth. This was what my father must have felt like, she thought.

She closed her eyes- at once...

Nathaniel screamed, 'Don't do it!' At the same time, a chair clattered to the floor and several voices called out at once.

She squeezed the trigger.

Click...

Nothing. Maggie opened her eyes.

Instantly, the room was a roar of sound. People were on their feet, cheering. Maggie was so weak with joy and relief she found she could not hold on to the gun and let it fall to the floor. Then Natalie had rocketed into Maggie's arms.

'Oh, Maggie, oh, Maggie,' she kept saying.

'I'm so sorry.' Maggie was saying, 'It's okay, it's okay,' but she did not feel the words leave her mouth. Her lips were numb, her tongue was numb, her body was quivering like it was preparing to disintegrate. When Nathaniel released her,

Maggie thudded into a chair.

It was over...

She was alive...

Someone pressed a drink into her hand, and she sipped gratefully before noticing it was warm beer. Then -Digging was in front of her, saying, 'I did not think you would do it. Wow. Holy sh\*t.' She did not know whether Matt congratulated her; if he did, she did not register it.

Vivian smiled at her but said nothing.

Even Marcel came over. 'Look, Maggie,' he said, kneeling so they were at eye level. For a second, his eyes searched hers, and she was sure he was going to tell her something important.

Instead, he just said, 'Keep this safe, okay?' and pressed something into her hand. She slipped it mindlessly into her pocket.

Suddenly, Maggie wanted to get out of there more than anything. Away from the too-close smells of beer and old cigarettes and other people's breath; far away from Fresh Pines, where she had never intended to return in the first place. She wanted to be back at Anne's house, in the blue room, listening to the wind sing through the trees, listening to Lily's sleep murmurs. It took her two attempts to get to her feet. She felt like her body had been sewn together backward.

'Let's go, okay?' Nathaniel said. Her breath smelled a little like beer, and normally Maggie would have been annoyed that she was drinking right before they were going to drive. But she did not have the strength to argue, or even to care.

'That was epic,' Nathaniel said, as soon as they were in the car. 'Seriously, Maggie. Everyone will be talking about it for years. I do think it is unfair, though. I mean, your challenge was, like, a billion times harder than Marcel's. You could have died.'

Can we not talk about this?' Maggie said. She unrolled her window a little, inhaling the smell of pine and climber moss. Alive.

'Sure, yes.' Nathaniel looked over at her. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm okay,' Maggie said. She was thinking her way into the depth of the woods, the soft spaces of growth and shadow.

She shifted to lean her head against the window and felt something in her pocket. She remembered what

Marcel had given it to her. She wondered whether he felt guilty about his earlier outburst.

She reached into her pocket. Just then they passed under a streetlamp, and as Maggie uncurled her fingers, time seemed to stop for a second. Everything was perfectly still: Nathaniel with both hands on the wheel, mouth open to speak; the trees outside, frozen in anticipation.

Maggie's fingers half-uncurled. And the bullet, resting in the fleshy middle of her palm.

SUNDAY,

AUGUST 14

IT WAS ALREADY THE SECOND WEEK OF AUGUST. The game was ending. Four players remained: Marcel, Maggie, Nathaniel, and Ray.

For the first time since the game began, people began to place bets that Maggie would win, although Ray and Marcel were still evenly split for the favorite.

Maggie heard that Ray passed his solo challenge: he had broken into the county morgue in East Juniper and stayed locked up next to the corpses all night. Creepy, odd, and weird, but not likely to kill him; Maggie was still angry that her challenge had been the worst. But then, of course, there was the fact that Marcel had ensured her challenge would be harmless too.

Marcel, who had palmed a bullet while making a show of checking the gun for ammo. Marcel, who now refused to pick up her phone calls. It was such a joke. Joh- John called Maggie

incessantly. Then at that moment she called out the name-Marcel.

Krista called Maggie. No one picked up for anyone else. Like some mixed-up game of telephone. Nathaniel stayed out of it. She had still not been given her solo challenge.

Every day, Nathaniel grew paler and skinnier. For once, she was not chattering endlessly about all the guys she was dating. She had even announced, solemnly, that she thought she might try and stay away from guys for a while.

Maggie did not know if it was the game or whatever had happened on the night of Nathaniel's birthday, but Nathaniel reminded Maggie of a painting she had once seen reproduced in a history textbook, of a nobility awaiting the guillotine.

A week after Maggie's challenge, the blade fell. Maggie and Nathaniel had taken Lily to the mall to see a movie, mostly to get out of the heat-it had been recorded ninety-five degrees for three straight days, and Maggie felt as if she was moving through soup. The sky was a scorched, pale blue; the trees were motionless in the shimmering heat.

Afterward, they returned in Nathaniel's car to Anne's house. Nathaniel knew, at last, that Maggie was not living at home, and had offered to come sleep at Anne's with her, even though she disliked the dogs and would not even get close to the White Bengal's pen. But Anne had left town for the weekend to visit her sister-in-law on the coast, and Maggie hated being in the big, old house without her.

That was one good thing about the trailer: you always knew what was, where the walls were, who was home. Anne's house was different: full of wood that creaked and groaned, ghost sounds, mysterious thumps, and scratching noises.

'Get it,' Nathaniel said when her phone dinged between her legs.

'Ewe. I am not reaching for it,' Maggie said.

Nathaniel giggled and tossed the phone at her, taking her hand off the wheel only briefly. She swerved, and Lily yelped from the backseat.

'Sorry, Bill,' Nathaniel said.

'Don't call me that,' Lily said primly. Nathaniel laughed. But Maggie was sitting with the phone in her lap, ice running through her wrists, into her hands.

'What's the matter?' Nathaniel asked.

Then her face got serious. 'Is it-?' She cut herself off and glanced in the rearview at Lily, who was listening attentively.

Maggie read the text again.

Impossible... 'Did you tell anyone you were sleeping over at Anne's tonight?' she asked, in a muffled voice.

Nathaniel shrugged. 'My parents. And Joh- John. I mentioned it to Joey, too.'

Maggie slid Nathaniel's phone shut and chucked it into the glove compartment. Suddenly she wanted it as far from her as possible.

'What...?' Nathaniel asked.

'Someone knows that Anne's gone,' Maggie said. She turned the radio up so Lily could not eavesdrop.

'The judges know.' Who had Maggie told? Marcel had mentioned it to him in a text. Said he should come over, so they could talk, so she could thank him. And of course, Anne had told

some people, probably; it was Carp, and people talked because they had nothing else to do.

The implication of what Maggie had just read-what Nathaniel would have to do sank in. She unrolled her window, but the blast of warm air gave her no relief.

She should not have drunk so much soda at the movie theater. She was nauseous.

‘What is it?’ Nathaniel said. She looked afraid. Unconsciously, she had begun tapping out a rhythm on the steering wheel. ‘What do I have to do?’ Maggie looked at her. Her mouth tasted like ash, and she found she could not even speak a complete sentence.

‘The white Bengal’s,’ she said.

Marcel,

THE CHALLENGES were ALWAYS POPULAR, BUT THIS year, many spectators had been staying away. It was too risky. The police had threatened to haul in anyone associated with Fear, and everyone was worried about taking the rap for the fire at the Graybill house.

The rumor was Sadowski wanted someone-anyone-to take the fall. The roads, usually so empty, were infested with police cars, some from other counties.

But the word-white Bengal’s-was too much to resist. It had its lift and momentum: it flitted through the woods, stole its way into houses barred up against the heat, spun into the rhythm of fans that cycled in bedrooms across- Carp.

By afternoon, all the players and ex-players and spectators and bettors and welshes and squealers-everyone who cared even remotely about the game and its outcome-had



heard about the white Bengal's of Mansfield Road. Marcel was lying naked on his bed with two fans going at once when the text came in from Maggie. For a second, he was not sure whether he was sleeping or awake.

His room was dark and as hot as a mouth. He did not want to open the door, though. Ricky was over again, and he had brought food for Dayna, stuff he had cooked himself at the dinner, rice and beans, and shrimp that smelled like burned garlic. They were watching a movie, and occasionally, despite the noise of the ancient fans and the closed door, he could hear the muffled sound of laughter.

The effort of sitting up made Marcel begin to sweat. He punched in Joh- John's number.

'What the hell?' He said when Joh- John picked up. No preamble. No bullsh\*t. 'How could you do it? How could you make her do it?'

Joh- John sighed. 'Rules of the game, Marcel. I am not the only one in control of this sh\*t.' He sounded exhausted. 'If I do not make it hard enough, I will get replaced. And then I will not be able to help at all.'

Marcel ignored him. 'She will never go through with it. She should not.'

'She doesn't have to.' Marcel wanted to throw his phone against the wall, even though he knew what Joh- John said was true. For Marcel's plan to succeed, Nathaniel would have to drop out anyway, and soon. Still, it felt unfair. Too hard, too dangerous, like Maggie's challenge. But at least there, Joh- John-and Marcel-had made sure she would not be in any real danger. 'Maggie will find a way to help her,' Joh- John said, as though he could read Marcel's thoughts. 'You don't know that' Marcel said and hung up. He did not know why he was so angry.

He had known the rules of Terror from the start. But somehow everything had gotten out of control. He wondered whether Joh- John would show tonight, whether he could face it. Poor Natalie. He thought about calling her and trying to convince her to drop out, to leave it, but then he thought about how she would return the necklace to him, and what he had said to her that night -about opening her legs. It made him hot with shame. She had a right not to speak to him. She had a right to hate him, even.

But he will go tonight. And even if she did hate him, even if she ignored him completely, he wanted her to know that he was there. That he was sorry, too, for what he had said.

Time, for him, was running out.

Maggie- ONE OF MAGGIE'S PROBLEMS- OUT OF ABOUT A HUNDRED big problems- was what to do about Lily.

Anne had left them food for the weekend -mac 'n' cheese, not from a box, but made with real cheese and milk and a little spiral pasta, and tomato soup. Just hate it - made Maggie feel like a criminal: Anne had invited them into her home, was taking care of them, and Maggie was plotting behind her back. Maggie watched Lily polish off three portions. She did not know how Lily could eat in this heat. All the fans were going, all the windows were open, but it was still sweltering.

She could not have taken even a mouthful. She was sick with weakness and resolutions. Outside, the sky was turning to milk, the adumbrations were dividing long on the soil. It would not be long before sundown, and amusement time.

Maggie wondered what Natalie was doing. She had been locked upstairs for the past three hours. Maggie had heard the shuddering of pipes, the gush of water in the shower, three times.

After Lily ate, Maggie brought her into the sanctum: a big, dark room that still bore the sign of Anne's late husband-beat-up leather furniture and mohair blankets and rug that smelled a little like wet dog and old man ass with a hint of harry ball-sack.

Here it was a little cooler, although the leather stuck uncomfortably to Maggie's thighs when she sat down. 'I need you to promise me that you won't come outside,' Maggie said.

'There will be people. And you might hear noises. But you must stay right here, where it is safe. Promise me.'

Lily frowned. 'Does Anne know?' She asked.

That guilty feeling rode a wave up into Maggie's throat. She shook her head. 'And she won't,' she said. Lily picked at a bit of stuffing that had begun to poke out of the couch. She was silent for a second. Maggie wished, suddenly, she could take Lily into her arms and squeeze her, tell her everything -how scared she was, how she did not know what would happen to either of them.

'This is about Fear, isn't it?' Lily said. She looked up. Her face was expressionless, her eyes flat. They reminded Maggie of the White Bengal's eyes: ancient, all-seeing. Maggie knew there was no point in lying. So, she said, 'It's almost over.'

Lily did not move when Maggie kissed her head, which smelled like grass and sweat. The leather released Maggie's skin with a sharp sucking sound. She put on a DVD about a zoo, which Lily had requested- another gift from Anne. Anne, Maggie knew, was a good person. The best person Maggie had ever met.

So, what did that make Maggie? She was at the door when Lily spoke up. 'Are you going to win?' Maggie turned

around to her. She had left the lights off, so it would stay cool, and Lily's face was in shadow. Maggie tried to smile. 'I'm already winning,' she lied and closed the door behind her.

The haze of the sky, milk-white and scorched, at last, turned dark; and the trees impaled the sun, and all the light broke apart. Then they came: quietly, tires moving soundlessly on the dirt, headlights bouncing like overgrown fireflies through the woods. There was no thudding music, no shouting. Everyone was on alert for police officers.

Maggie stood outside, waiting. The dogs were going crazy; she kept feeding them treats, trying to get them to shut up. She knew there were no neighbors around for miles, but she could not shake the feeling that someone would hear- that Anne would know, somehow, be summoned back to the house by the barking.

Nathaniel had still not come down. Maggie had fed the white Bengals more than double their normal amount. Now, as the last light drained from the sky, and the stars began to pulse through the liquid haze of heat, they were lying on their sides, asleep and indifferent to all the cars.

Maggie prayed they would stay that way so that Nathaniel could do whatever she needed to do and get out.

Car after car: -Digging, Ray Hanrahan, even some of the players who had been Eliminated early, like Cory Walsh and Ellie Hayes; Mindy Crammer and a bunch of her dance team friends, still dressed in bikinis and cutoffs and bare feet, like they had just come from the beach; Even Sell or, eyes red-rimmed and liquid, obviously drunk, with two friends Maggie did not recognize; people she had not seen since the challenge at the water tower. Matt Hefley, too, and Delaney. He walked right by Maggie, pretending she did not exist. She found she did not care.

They drifted across the yard and gathered around the White Bengal's pen, silent, disbelieving. Flashlights clicked on as it got darker; the floodlights on the barn, motion-detected, came on too, illuminating the white Bengal's, sleeping side by side, so still they might have been statues, held in a flat palm of the earth.

'I don't believe it,' someone whispered.

'No freaking way.' But there they were: no matter how many times you blinked or looked away. White Bengal's. A bit of a miracle, a circus wonder, right there on the grass under the Carp trees and the Carp sky. Maggie was relieved to see Marcel arrive on his bicycle. She still had not had a chance to thank him in person for what he had done.

Almost immediately, he asked, 'Is Joh- John here?'

She shook her head. He made a face.

'Marcel,' she said. 'I wanted to say...'

'Don't.' He put a hand on her arm and squeezed gently. 'Not yet...'

She did not know exactly what he meant. She wondered, for the first time, what Marcel was planning to do this fall, and whether he would remain in Carp, or whether he had plans for a job somewhere-or even college. She had never paid any attention to how he did in school.

Suddenly the thought of Marcel leaving made her sad. They were friends or something like it that was close enough.

It struck her how sad it was that all of them-the kids standing here, her classmates and friends, and even the people she had hated-had grown up on top of one another like small animals in a too-small cage, and now would simply scatter. And

that would be the end of that. Everything that had happened- those stupid school dances and basement after-parties, football games, days of rain that lulled them all to sleep in math class, summers swimming at the creek and stealing sodas from the coolers at the back of the 7-Eleven, even now, this, Fear-would be sucked away into memory and vapor, as though it had not even happened at all.

‘Where’s Natalie?’ That was -Digging. He was speaking softly, as if afraid to wake the white Bengal’s. Hardly anyone made a sound. They were all still transfixed by the sight of those dreamlike creatures, stretched long on the ground like shadows.

‘I’ll get her,’ Maggie said. She was grateful to have an excuse to go into the house, even for a moment. What she was doing, what she was helping Nathaniel do, was too horrible. She thought of Anne’s face, her smile turning her eyes into a squint.

She had never felt so much like a criminal, not even when she had taken her mom’s car and run away. Another car was arriving, and she knew from the spitting and hissing of its engine that it was Joh- John. She was right. Just as she reached the front door, he climbed out of his car and spotted her.

‘Maggie!’ Even though he was not shouting, his voice seemed to her like a slap in the silence. She ignored him. She stepped into the kitchen and found Natalie sitting at the table, eyes red. There was a shot glass in front of her, and a bottle of whiskey.

‘Where’d you get that?’ Maggie asked.

‘In the pantry.’ Nathaniel did not even look up. ‘I am sorry. I only had a sip, though.’ She made a face. ‘It’s awful.’

'It's time,' Maggie said. Nathaniel nodded and stood up. She was wearing denim shorts and no shoes; her hair was still wet from the shower.

Maggie knew that if Nathaniel were not so afraid, she would have insisted on putting on makeup, on doing her hair. Maggie thought Nathaniel had never looked so beautiful. Her fierce and fearful friend- who loved country music and cherry Pop-Tarts and singing in public and pink, who was terrified of germs, dogs, and ladders.

'I love you, Nathaniel,' Maggie said on impulse.

Nathaniel looked startled, as though she had already forgotten Maggie was there.

'You, too, Heath bar,' she said. She managed to have a small smile. 'I'm ready.' Joh- John was standing some little ways, from the house, pacing, bringing his fingers up to his lips and down again as though he were smoking an invisible cigarette. As Nathaniel moved into the crowd, he caught up with Maggie.

'Please...' His voice was hoarse.

'We need to talk.'

'This is kind of an inconvenient time.' Her voice came out harsher, more sarcastic than she had intended. It occurred to her that she had not seen Vivian, and she wondered whether Joh- John had begged her not to come. Please, babe. Just until I can patch things up with Maggie.

She is jealous, you know - she always had a thing for me. The thought made her throat knot up, and a part of her just wanted to tell Joh- John to freak off. Then there was the part of her that wanted to put her arms around his neck and feel his laughter humming through his chest, feel the wild tangle of his

hair on her face. Instead, she crossed her arms as if she could press the feeling down.

‘I need to tell you something.’

Joh- John licked his lips. He looked awful. His face was sickly, different shades of yellow and green, and he was too skinny. ‘It’s important.’

‘Later, okay?’ Before he could protest, she moved past him. Natalie had reached the fence, closer to the White Bengal’s than she had ever allowed herself to go. Unconsciously, the crowd had backed off a little, so she was surrounded by a halo of negative space-like she was Contaminated with something contagious. Maggie jogged over to her. Now the dogs started up again, shattering the stillness, and Maggie hushed them sharply as she passed the kennel. She pushed easily through the crowd and stepped into Nathaniel’s open circle, feeling as if she were trespassing.

‘It’s okay,’ she whispered. ‘I’m here.’ But Nathaniel did not seem to hear her.

‘The rules are simple,’ -Digging said. Even though he was speaking at a normal volume, to Maggie it sounded like he was shouting. She began praying the White Bengal would not wake up. They still had not even lifted their heads. She noticed a bit of the steak she had given them earlier was still untouched, buzzing with flies, and could not decide if that was a good thing or not. ‘You go into the pen, you stand with the White Bengal’s for ten seconds, you get out.’ He emphasized this last part just slightly.

‘How close?’ Nathaniel said.

Part: 12

‘What?’



‘How close do I have to get?’ she asked, turning to him.

-Digging shrugged. ‘Just inside, I guess.’

Nathaniel pushed out a small breath. Maggie smiled at her encouragingly, even though she felt like her skin was made of clay about to crack. But if the white Bengal’s slept, Nathaniel would have no problem. They were a full forty feet away from the gate. Nathaniel would not even have to go near them.

‘I’ll time you,’ -Digging said. Then:

‘Who has the key to the gate?’

‘I do.’ Maggie stepped forward. She heard a slight rustle, as everyone turned to stare at her; she felt the heat of all those eyes on her skin. The air was leaden, still.

Maggie fumbled in her pocket for the key to the padlock. Nathaniel’s breathing was rapid and shallow, like an injured animal. For a second, Maggie could not feel the key and did not know whether to be relieved; then her fingers closed around the metal.

In the silence and the stillness, the click of the padlock seemed as loud as a rifle report. She un-looped the heavy chain carefully and laid it on the ground, then slid the metal latches back, one by one, desperately trying to stall, trying to give Nathaniel a few more seconds. As the final latch clanged open, both white Bengals lifted their heads in unison, as though sensing that something was coming.

The whole group inhaled as one.

Nathaniel let out a whimper.

‘It’s okay,’ Maggie told her, gripping Nathaniel by the shoulders. She could feel Nathaniel trembling under her hands.

‘Ten seconds. You just must step inside the gate. It will be done before you know it.’

People had started buzzing, giggling- nervously, shifting. Now the stillness was replaced with electric energy. And as Nathaniel took one halting step toward the gate, and then another, the White Bengal’s, too, stood up-twisting onto their feet, stretching, yawning their enormous jaws so their teeth glistened in the floodlight -as though they had decided to perform.

Nathaniel paused with a hand on the gate.

Then her other hand. Then both hands. Her mouth was moving, and Maggie wondered if she was counting or praying, whether for Nathaniel they were the same thing. Dwarfed by the gate, silhouetted against the sharp, unnatural light, she looked unreal, one-dimensional, like a cardboard cutout.

‘You don’t have to do it.’

Marcel’s... voice was loud and so unexpected that everyone turned to stare. Nathaniel turned too, and Maggie saw her frown. Then she pulled open the gate and stepped inside.

Part: 13

‘Start the timer,’ Maggie cried out.

She saw -Digging fumbling for his phone.

‘Now...’

‘Okay, okay,’ -Digging said. ‘Time!’ It was too late. The White Bengal’s had started to move. Slowly, their massive heads swing between their shoulder blades like some awful clock pendulum - tick, tick, tick. But still, they were too close,

already too close; three strides and they covered five yards, mouths open, grinning.

‘Three seconds!’ -Digging announced.

Impossible. Surely Nathaniel had been in the pen for ten minutes, for half an hour, forever. Maggie’s heart was bursting out of her throat. No one spoke. No one moved. Everything was a black sea, dim and featureless: everything but the bright circle of white light, and the cardboard cutout Nathaniel, and the long shadow of the white Bengal’s. Nathaniel was shaking now, and whimpering, too. Maggie feared for a second that she would collapse. Then what? Would the white Bengal’s pounce? Would she, Maggie, be brave enough to try to stop them?

She knew she would not. Her legs were water, and she could hardly breathe.

‘Seven seconds!’ -Digging’s voice was shrill, like an alarm.

The White Bengals were less than eight feet from Nathaniel. They would be on top of her in two more places. Maggie could hear them breathing, see their whiskers twitching, tasting the air. Nathaniel had started to cry. But she still held herself there, rigid. She was too scared to move. Their eyes, like deep black pools, had transfixed her.

‘Eight seconds!’ Then one of the white Bengal’s twitched; a muscle flexed, and Maggie knew it was getting ready to pounce, felt it, knew it would jump on Natalie and tear her apart and they would all stand, watching, helpless. And just as she was trying to scream Run but could not, because her throat was too thick with terror, Nathaniel did run. Someone else screamed it.

There was noise suddenly-people shouting-and Nathaniel was out of the gate and slamming it shut, leaning back, crying.

Just as the white Bengal, the one Maggie had been sure was moving to spring, lay down again.

‘Nine seconds,’ -Digging said above the sudden roar of sound. Maggie registered a small burst of triumph- Nathaniel was out of the game and then a stronger pull of shame. She pushed over to Nathaniel and drew her into a hug.

‘You were amazing,’ she said into the top of Nathaniel’s hair.

‘I didn’t make it,’ Nathaniel said. Her voice was muffled and her face sticky against Maggie’s chest.

‘You were still amazing,’ Maggie said.

Nathaniel was the only one who was not celebrating. She returned almost immediately to the house. But everyone else seemed to forget about the threat of police officers, forget about what had happened at the Graybill house and about the body of Little Kelly, found charred and blackened in the basement for a short while, it felt as it had at the beginning of the summer when the players had first made the jump.

It took more than an hour for Maggie to get everyone out, into their cars and off the property, and the whole time the dogs were going crazy and the White Bengal’s were still again, as though deliberately making a point. By the time the yard was almost empty of cars, exhaustion numbed Maggie’s fingers and toes. But it was over, thank God. It was all over, and Anne would never have to know. There were only three players left.

And Maggie was one of them.

‘Maggie,’ Joh- John tried again when everyone had gone. ‘We need to talk.’

‘Not tonight, Joh- John.’ A few people were lingering, leaning up against their cars, easily each other’s pants. Strange how just a few months ago she had been one of them, hanging out at parties with Matt, her capital B Boyfriend, flaunting it however she could. Wearing his sweatshirts, his baseball hats, like a badge of something -that she was lovable, that she was fine, and normal and just like everybody else. Already the old Maggie seemed like someone she barely knew.

‘You can’t avoid me forever,’ Joh- John said, deliberately moving in front of her as she stooped to collect a cigarette pack, half trampled into the grass. She straightened up. His hair was poking out from every side of his hat, like something alive trying to get out.

She obtained the urge to reach up and try and fight it into the configuration. The most dangerous was that when she looked at him now, she still saw their kiss: the heat that had roared through her and the mellowness of his lips and the brief instantaneous moment when his tongue had found hers.

‘I’m not avoiding you,’ she said, looking away so she would not have to remember. ‘I’m just tired.’

‘When then?’ He looked lost. ‘It is important, are you all, right? I need you now. I need you to listen.’

She was intrigued to ask him why Vivian could not listen, but she did not. He resembled awful and sorrowful, and she loved him even if he did not love her. The feeling that he was upset, in pain, was a worse feeling than her pain.

‘Tomorrow,’ she said. Foolishly, she stretched out and squeezed his hand. He looked startled, and she dropped it

immediately, as though it might burn her. 'I guarantee tomorrow.'

Part: 14

MONDAY,

AUGUST 15

Maggie IN THE Morningtide, MAGGIE WAS Aroused UP By yelling. Lily was calling her name, pounding up the stairs; then the door flew open, so hard it struck the wall.

Lily said, 'The White Bengal's are gone now.' She was gasping hard, her face red and clammy with sweat. She smelled a little like manure-she must have been out feeding the creatures.

'What?' Instantly Maggie was awake and sitting up.

'The gate is open, and they're gone,' Lily said.

'Unthinkable...' Maggie was already pulling on clothes, shoving her legs into shorts, wrestling on a T-shirt. She did not even bother with a bra. 'Vain,' she repeated, but even as she said it, a dull thud of terror began, bringing back images from last night, dismembered memories-hugging Nathaniel, latching the gates. Had she replaced the fastener device?

She could not remember. Mindy Crammer had been talking to her about her job at Anne's, and then she had had to yell at Even Zen Seller for trying to get into the pigpen. She must have substituted the fastener.

The White Bengal's were not missing. They were just hiding out in the trees somewhere, where Lily had not spotted them. Underneath, Maggie saw that it was already eleven a.m., that she had overslept, that Anne would be home soon.

Lily understood her outside. It was another day of thick heat, but this time the sky was overcast, and there was moisture shimmering in the air like a screen. It would rain. She was halfway across the yard when she saw it: the fastener, coiled in the grass like a metal snake, exactly where she had placed it last night when she unlocked the gate for Natalie.

And the gate, now swinging open. The terror turned to stone and dropped straight through her stomach. There was no need to search for the whole enclosure. They were gone. She could manipulate this. Why didn't the dog bark? But they had, and she had not heard. Or they had been frightened, bewitched like the crowd last night. Maggie closed her eyes. For a second, she thought she might faint. The White Bengal's were withdrawn, it was her fault, and now Anne would despise her and throw her out. She would possess every right too. She opened her eyes, fueled by a wild Fear: she had to find them, now, quickly, before Anne came home.

'Stay here,' she told Lily, but she did not have the force to argue when Lily followed her back into the house.

She hardly apprehended what she was doing. She found a bucket under the sink, dumped out a bunch of shriveled sponges and washing types of equipment, and filled it with some half-thawed steaks. Then she went out of the house again and plunged into the woods. Mayhap they had not gone far, and she could lure them back.

'Where are we going?' Lily asked. 'Sh-h-h,' Maggie said sharply. She considered the bite of tears in her eyes. How could she be such a nincompoop, such an absolute moron?

The bucket was heavy, and she had to pull it with both hands, considering from left to right, looking for a flash of color, those luminous black eyes. Come on, come on, come on. Behind Maggie, there was rustling in the undergrowth, a shift in the air-

a presence, animal, watchful. Suddenly it struck Maggie that what she was doing was thick-witted: charging off into the woods with Lily, searching for the White Bengal's like they were lost kittens, hoping to lure them home.

If she did find the white Bengal's, they would tear her head off for a snack. A stimulating zip of fear went up to her spine. She was over conscious of every rustle, every snapping twig, the diamond patterns of light and shadow that could easily conceal a pair of eyes, a swath of tawny fur.

'Take my hand, Lily,' she said, trying to keep the fear out of her voice.

'Let's go back inside.'

'What about the white Bengal's?' Lily asked. She thought it was an adventure.

'We'll have to call Anne,' Maggie said, and instantly knew it was true. She still had the unmistakable sense of something Other watching her, watching them. 'She'll know what to do.' A raccoon punched its head swiftly from between the fat leaves of a spire-a bush, and Maggie felt a flood of relief that nearly made her pee. She abandoned the bucket in the woodlands. It was too cumbersome, and she wanted to move quickly.

As they were emerging from the woods just next to the outdoor shower, Maggie could hear tires spitting on the driveway and thought that Anne must be homeward. She did not know whether to feel appreciative or afraid. She was both.

But then she saw the rusted hood of Joh- John's Le Sabre and remembered she had promised him they could talk today.'



Joh- John! 'Lily was running to him before he had even fully extricated himself from the car. 'The white Bengal's are gone! The White Bengal's are gone!'

'What?' He looked even worse than he had the night ahead, as though he had not slept at all. He turned to Maggie. 'Is it correct?'

'It's true,' she said. 'I forgot to padlock the gates.' Suddenly, the truth hit her like a hard punch to the stomach, and she was crying. She would get kicked out of Anne's house; they would have to move back to 'Fresh Pines' or go on the run. Furthermore, Anne would be devastated. Anne, who was the only person who gave a sh\*t about Maggie.

'Hey, hey.' Joh- John was next to her.

She did not resist when he hugged her.

'It is not your responsibility. It is going to be okay.'

'It is my fault.' She buried her face in the hollow of his joint and yelled until she coughed, while he rubbed her back and her hair, touched her lightly on her cheek, murmured into the top of her head. Only Joh- John could make her feel small. Only Joh- John could make her feel defended.

She did not even hear the entrance of Anne's car until a door was slamming and Anne's voice, frantic, called, 'What is the matter? What is wrong?'

Maggie stepped away from Joh- John and quickly, Anne took her by the arms. 'Are you okay? Are you hurt?'

'It's not me.' Maggie swiped an arm across her nose. Her mouth was thick with the taste of phlegm, and she could not look Anne in the eye. 'I'm fine.' She tried to say it. The White Bengal's are gone. The White Bengal's are gone. Lily was

quiet, her mouth moving soundlessly. It was Joh- John who spoke. 'The white Bengals got out,' he said.

Interval 9

Flashbacks

Chapter: 29

(Flashback text- video message.) ≈ Memories of Karly...

≈

Part: 1

Memories

I get a new text message- and there is a photo attached- and there it is Maggie, spared, showing off her new butt plug in her hole... making it push in and out as she squeezes down hard on it... it is pink! And oh, so sparkly she said! And she is playing with herself- also.

I love this video. I have it...

It is on my pc now... with all the porn... and sh\*t of here young sex ass!

Something they all knew after I passed... I was... um... living a fake and gay life... take that any way you want to... It is all good for me now. Cute for she was born in 2000, and she calls me old for I was born in the late- 1990's... 1998- for a fact.

(Now)

My vision is cloudy. I can barely make out the banisters. I am tripping, half falling down the stairs, finding the front door by touch. I think Hanna might be calling to me, but everything is lost to a roaring, rushing in my ears, inside my head. Sunshine, brilliant, brilliant white light-cool biting iron under my fingers, the gate-ocean smells, gasoline.

Wailing, growing louder. A punctuated shriek: beep, beep, beep.

My head clears all at once and I jump out of the middle of the street just before I am squashed by a police car, which barrels past me, horn still blaring, siren whirling, leaving me coughing up dirt and dust. The ache in my throat gets so bad it feels like I am gagging, and when I finally let the tears come, it is a huge relief, like dropping something heavy after you have been carrying it for a long time. Once I start crying, I cannot stop, and all the way home I must keep mashing my palm into my eyes every few seconds, smearing away the tears just so

I can see where I am going. I comfort myself by thinking that in less than two months this will seem like nothing to me.

All of it will fall away and I will rise new and free, like a bird winging up into the air.

Part: 2

Lasting images

That is what Hanna does not understand, has never understood. For some of us, it is about more than the deliria. Some of us, the lucky ones, will get the chance to be reborn: newer, fresher, better. Healed, whole, and perfect again, like a misshapen slab of iron that comes out of the fire glowing, glittering, razor-sharp.

That is all I want; all I have ever wanted. That is the promise of the cure.

Lord-

Suspicious minds-

Keep our hearts fixed as you fixed the planets in their orbits and cooled the chaos of emerging-

As the gravity of your will keeps star and star from  
Collapsing... Keeps the ocean from turning to dust and dust  
from turning to water... Keeps planets from colliding... And suns  
from exploding-

So, Lord, keep our hearts fixed in the steady orbit and  
help them stay on the path.

-Psalm 21 plays over in my mind...

That night, even after I was in bed, Hana's words reply  
endlessly in my head. You will not end up like her. You do not  
have it in you. She only said it to comfort me, I know it should  
be reassuring-but for some reason it is not. For some reason, it  
makes me upset; there is a deep aching in my chest, as though  
something large, cold, and sharp is lodged there.

Here is another thing Hana does not understand:  
Thinking about the disease, and worrying about it, and stressing  
about whether I have inherited some predisposition for it- that  
is all I have of my mom. The disease is what I know about her.  
Here is the link...

Otherwise, I have nothing.

It is not that I do not have memories of her. I do lots of  
them, considering how young I was when she died. I remember  
that when there was fresh snow, she would send me outside to  
pack pans with handfuls of it. Once inside we would drizzle  
maple syrup into the snow-filled pans, watching it harden into  
amber candy instantly, all loops and fragile, sugared filigree, like  
edible lace. I remember how much she loved to sing to us as she  
bounced me in the water at the beach off Eastern Prom.

I did not know how strange this was at the time. Other  
mothers teach their children to swim. Other mothers bounce  
their babies in the water and apply sunscreen to make sure

their babies do not burn and do all the things that a mother is supposed to do, as outlined in the book of hush-hush- But they do not sing.

I remember that she brought me trays of buttered toast when I was sick and kissed my bruises when I fell, and I remember once when she lifted me to my feet after I fell off my bike and began to rock me in her arms, a woman gasped and said to her, 'You should be ashamed of yourself,' and I did not understand why which made me cry harder. After that, she comforted me only in private. In public, she would just frown and say,

'You are okay, Lena. Get up.'

We used to have dance parties too. My mother called them 'sock jams,' because we would roll up the carpets in the living room and put on our thickest socks and slip and slide along the wooden hallways.

Part: 3

Always on my mind

Evan Rachel joined in, though she always claimed to be too old for baby games.

My mom would draw the curtains and wedge pillows under the front and back doors and turn up the music. We laughed so hard I always went to bed with a stomachache.

Eventually, I understood that on our sock-jam nights she would close the curtains to prevent us from being seen by passing patrols, that she had stopped up the doors with pillows so that the neighbors would not report us for playing music and laughing too much, both potential warning signs of the deliria.

I understood that she used to tuck my father's military pin- a silver dagger he had inherited from his father, which she wore every day on a chain around her neck-beneath the collar of her shirt whenever we left the house, so no one would see it and become suspicious. I understood that all the happiest moments of my childhood were a lie.

They were wrong, unsafe, and illegal.

They were freakish. My mother was freakish, and I had inherited the freakishness from her.

For the first time, I wonder what she must have been feeling, thinking, the night she walked out to the cliffs and kept walking, feet pedaling the air. I wonder whether she was scared. I wonder whether she thought of me or Rachel... I wonder whether she was sorry for leaving us behind.

I started thinking about my father, too. I do not remember him at all, though I have some dim, ancient impression of two warm, rough hands and a large looming face floating above mine. That is just because my mother kept a framed portrait in her bedroom of my father and me. I was only a few months old, and he was holding me, smiling, looking at the camera. But there is no way I am remembering for real. I was not even a year old when he died.

Cancer...!

(Flashback)

Karly- Maggie just loves wearing my class ring, that has a 1950's look gold with a silver inlay, and the band swatter that I gave up for Jenny and the girls- Just to be popular- as you no band is not cool when you do something more than they can... that is red- white- and blue... yes, it has my name on it- yet they

all think it was for she has nothing- ha it for the fact I love her.  
Little do they all know.

Part: 4

Media

Twitter: @Olivia- 'Showing her puss- puss- nice, no? I am not that slutty!' Ha- love her!!!! You can see all her puss pics on Instagram also... the boys love- for reals. That is what it is all about the boys and popularity- and who hooks up with whom... grade freak that... I want to be laid- not the grade. That is how I thought then.

(Now)

Girl boy girl in- bad- rubbing- licking- kissing- sucking- his head.

The heat is horrible, thick, clotting on the walls. Kellie is rolled over on her back, arms and legs flung open on top of her comforter, breathing silently with her mouth gaping open. Hanna is fast asleep, murmuring soundlessly into her pillow. The whole room smells like a wet exhalation, skin and tongues, and warm milk.

I eased out of bed, already dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt. I did not even bother to change into my pajamas. I knew I would never be able to sleep tonight. And earlier in the evening, I had come to a decision. I was sitting at the dinner table with Carol and Uncle William, Jenny, and Grace, while everyone chewed and swallowed in silence, staring blankly at one another, feeling as though the air was weighing down on me, constricting my breath, like two fists squeezing tighter and tighter around a water balloon, when I realized something.

Hanna said I did not have it in me, but she was wrong.

My heart is beating so loudly I can hear it, and I am positive that everyone else will too-that it will make my aunt sit bolt upright in her bed, ready to catch me and accuse me of trying to sneak out.

Which is, of course, exactly what I am trying to do. I did not even know a heart could beat so loudly, and it reminds me of an Edgar Allan Poe story we had to read in one of our social studies classes, about this guy who kills this other guy and then gives himself up to the police because he is convinced, he can hear the dead guy's heart beating up from beneath his floorboards. It is supposed to be a story about guilt and the dangers of civil disobedience, but when I first read it, I thought it seemed lame and melodramatic. Now I get it, though. Poe must have snuck out a lot when he was young.

I ease open the bedroom door, holding my breath, praying it does not squeak. At one point Jenny lets out a shout and my heart freezes. But then she rolls over, flinging one arm across her pillow, and I exhale slowly, realizing she is just fussing in her sleep.

The hall is dark. The room my aunt and uncle share-like is- dark too, and the only sound comes from the whispering of the trees outside and the low ticks and groans from the walls, the usual old house arthritic noises. I finally worked up the courage to slip out into the hall and slide the bedroom door shut behind me. I go so slowly that it almost feels like I am not moving at all, feeling my way by the bumps and ripples in the wallpaper over to the stairs, then sliding my hand inch by inch over the banister, walking on my very tiptoes. Even so, it seems like the house is fighting me like it is just screaming for me to be caught. Every step seems to creak, shriek, or moan.

Part: 5

Socializing



Liv on- Instagram- 'You will- like- be seeing a lot of here in the upcoming slideshow! Cute but- OMG!'

I think Jenny too wide and sh\*t, and raunchy slutty to show those... you- have seen here photos by now... what did you think... cute...??? Or am I the cutest?

Snap-chat me for 1,000 tokens, and you have it for life!

All single floorboard quivers and shudders under my feet, and I start mentally bargaining with the house: If I make it to the front door without waking up mom, would- I swear to God I will never slam another door. I will never call you 'an old piece of turd' again, not even in my head, and I will never curse the basement when it floods, and I will never, ever, ever kick the bedroom wall when I am annoyed at Jenny.

The house hears me, because, miraculously, I do make it to the front door. I pause for a second longer, listening to the sounds of footsteps upstairs, whispered voices, anything- but other than my heart, which is still going strong and loud, it is silent.

Even the house seems to hesitate and take a breath, because the front door swings open with barely a whisper, and in the last second before I slip out into the night the rooms behind me are as dark and still as a grave.

Outside, I hesitate on the front stoop.

The fireworks stopped an hour ago- I heard the last stuttering explosions, like distant gunfire, just as I was getting ready for bed and now the streets are strangely silent and empty. It is a little after eleven o'clock. Some courses must be lingering at the Eastern Prom.

Part: 6

## Nocturnal

Everyone else is home by now. Not a single light is burning on the street. All the streetlamps were disabled years ago, except in the richest parts of Pittsburgh, and they look to me like blinded eyes. Thank God, the moon is so bright.

I strain to detect the sounds of passing patrols or groups of regulators - I almost hope I do, because then I will have to go back inside, to my bed, to safety, and already the panic is starting to drill through me again. But everything is perfectly still and quiet, like it is frozen. Everything rational, right, and good is screaming for me to turn around and go upstairs, but some stubborn inner center keeps me moving forward.

I go down the walk and unchain my bike from the gate.

My bike rattles a little bit, particularly when you first start pedaling, so I walk it some ways down the street. The wheels tick reassuringly over the pavement.

I have never been out this late on my own in my life. I have never broken curfew. But alongside the fear, which is always there, of course, that constant crushing weight is a small, flickering feeling of excitement that works its way up and underneath the fear, pushing it back some. Like, it is okay, I am all right, I can do this. I am just a girl-an in-between girl, five-two, nothing special- but I can do this, and all the curfews and the patrols in the world are not stopping me.

It is amazing how much comfort this thought gives me. It is amazing how it breaks up the fear, as a tiny candle lit in the middle of the night, lighting up the shapes of things, burning away the dark.

When I reach the end of my street I hop up on my bike, feeling the gears shudder into place. The breeze feels good as I

start pedaling, careful not to go too quickly, staying alert in case there are regulators nearby. Fortunately, Stroud water and Roaring Brooke Farms are in the exact opposite direction from the

Fourth of July celebrations at Eastern Prom.

Once- I get to the broad swath of farmland that surrounds Pittsburgh like a belt, I should be okay. The farms and slaughterhouses rarely get patrolled. But first I must make it through the West End, where rich people like Hanna live, through the old town, and over the Fore River at Bridge Street.

Thankfully, each street I turn down is empty.

Stroud-water is a good thirty minutes away, even if I am biking quickly. As I get off- peninsula- moving away from the buildings and businesses of downtown Pittsburgh and onto the more suburban mainland-the houses get smaller and farther apart, set back on weedy, patchy yards. This is not rural Pittsburgh yet, but there are signs of the countryside creeping in: plants poking up through half-rotted porches, an owl hooting mournfully in the dark, a black scythe of bats cutting suddenly across the sky. All these houses have cars in front of them just like the richer houses in, Northern End but these have been salvaged from the junkyards.

They are mounted on cinder blocks and covered in rust. I pass one that has a tree growing straight through its sunroof, like the car has just dropped out of the sky and been impaled there, and another one, hood open, missing its engine. As I go past, a cat startles up out of its black cavity, meowing, blinking at me.

After I cross the Fore River the houses fall away altogether, and it is just field after field and farm after farm, with names like Meadow Lane and Sheep Bay and oak's part by

the river, which make them sound all homey and nice: places where someone might be baking muffins and skimming fresh cream for butter.

Across the fields I see the low, dark silhouettes of barns and silos, some of them brand-new, some of them barely standing, clinging to the earth like teeth Digging into something. The air smells slightly sweet, like growing things and manure.

But... but... but... but... um...

Most of the farms are owned by big corporations, packed with livestock, and often staffed by orphans.

I have always liked it out here, but it is freaky in the dark, open, and empty, and I cannot help but think that if I did come across a patrol there would be no place to hide, no alley to turn down.

Roaring Brooke's Farms is right next to the southwestern border of the town. It has been abandoned for years since half the main building and both grain silos were destroyed in a fire.

About five minutes before I get there, I think I can make out a rhythm drumming imperceptibly under the throaty song of the crickets, but for a while, I am not sure if I am just imagining it or only hearing my heart, which has started pounding again.

Farther on, though, and, I am sure. Even before I reach the little dirt road that leads down to the barn-or at least, the portion of the barn that is still standing- strains of music spring up, crystallizing in the night air like rain turning suddenly to snow, drifting to earth.

Now I am scared again. All I can think of is wrong, wrong, wrong, a word that drums in my head. Mom would kill me if she knew what I was doing.

~\*~

Kill- me or have me thrown into the Burial chamber or taken to the labs for an early procedure, willow, and oak marks—style.

I hop off my bike when I see the turnoff to Roaring Brooke, and the big metal sign stuck in the ground that reads PROPERTY OF Pittsburgh, NO TRESPASSING. I wheel my bike some little ways, into the woods at the side of the road. The actual farmhouse and the old barn are still five or six hundred feet down the road, but I do not want to take my bike any farther. I do not lock it up, though. I do not even want to think about what would happen if there was a raid, but if there is, I am not going to want to be fumbling with a lock in the half-dark. I will need speed.

I step around the NO TRESPASSING sign.

I am getting to be quite the expert at ignoring them, I realize, remembering how Hana and I hopped the gate at the labs. It is the first time I have thought about that afternoon in a while, and right then a vision of Alex rises in front of me, a memory of seeing him on the observation deck, head tilted back and laughing.

I must focus on the land around me, the brightness of the moon, the wildflowers on the road. It helps me beat back the feeling that I am going to be sick at any second. I do not know what compelled me out of the house, why I felt like I had to prove Hana wrong about something, and I am trying to ignore the idea-way more disturbing than anything else—that my argument with Hana was just an excuse.

That, deep down, I was simply curious.

Someone is singing: a beautiful voice as thick and heavy as warm honey, spilling up and down a scale so quickly I feel dizzy just listening.

That music was metallic and awful, fuzzy through the speakers. The music that is playing underneath the voice is strange, clashing, and wild-but nothing like the wailing and scratching that I heard Hana playing on her computer earlier today, though I recognize certain similarities, certain patterns of melody and rhythm.

This music ebbs and flows, irregular, sad. It reminds me, weirdly, of watching the ocean during a bad storm, the lashing, crashing waves, and the spray of sea foam against the docks; the way it takes your breath away, the power, and the hugeness of it. I am not feeling curious now. I am feeling scared. And very, very stupid.

The farmhouse and the old barn are positioned in a dip of land between two hills, a mini valley, like the constructions, are sitting right in the middle of somebody's pursed lips. Because of the way the land slopes I cannot see the farmhouse yet, but as I get closer to the top of the hill the music gets clearer, louder. It is like nothing I have ever heard before. It is not like- the authorized music you can download off LAM, prim, harmonious, and structured, the kind of music that gets played in the bandshell in Deering Oaks Park during official summer concerts.

That is exactly what happens as I listen to the music, as I come up over the final crest of a hill, and the half-ruined barn and collapsing farmhouse fan out in front of me, just as the music swells, a wave about to break: The breath leaves my body all at once, and I am struck dumb by the beauty of it. For a second it seems to me like I am looking down at the ocean-a sea

of people, writing and dancing in the light spilling down from the barn-like shadows twisting up around a flame.

The barn is completely gutted: split open and blackened by the fire, exposed to the elements. Only half of it is left standing fragments of three walls, a portion of the roof, part of an elevated platform that must once have been used to store hay. That is where the band is playing. Thin, stalky trees have begun pushing up in the fields. Older trees seared completely white from the fire and bald branches and leaves, point-like ghostly fingers to the sky.

Fifty feet beyond the barn, I see the low fringe of blackness where the unregulated land begins. The Wilds. I cannot make out the border fence from this distance, but I imagine I can feel it and can sense the electricity buzzing through the air. I have only been close to the border fence a few times. Once with my mother years ago, when she made me listen to the zipping of the electricity-a current so strong the air seems to hum with it; you can get a shock just from standing four feet away-and promise never, ever, ever to touch it.

She told me that when the cure was first made mandatory, some people tried to escape over the border. They never put more than a hand on the fence before being fried like bacon - I remember that is exactly what she said, like bacon.

Since then, I have run alongside it with Hanna a few times, always careful to stay a good ten feet away.

In the barn, someone has set up speakers and amps and even two enormous, industrial-sized lamps, which make everyone close to the stage look starkly white and hyper-real, and everyone else dark and indistinct, blurry.

A song ends and the crowd roars together with an ocean sound. I think they must be mooching power from a grid

on one of the other farms. I think, this is stupid, I will never find Hana, there are too many people and then a new song starts, this one just as wild and beautiful, and it is like the music reaches across all that black space and pulls at something at the very heart and root of me, plucking me like a string. I head down the hill toward the barn. The weird thing is I do not choose to do it.

My feet just go on their own, as though they have happened on some invisible track and it is all just slides, photographs, prints.

For a moment, I forgot that I was supposed to be looking for Hana. I feel as though I am in a dream, where strange things are happening, but they do not feel strange. Everything is cloudy- everything is wrapped in a fog, and I am filled from head to toe with the single, burning desire to get closer to the music, to hear the music better, for the music to go on and on and on.

‘Kellie! Oh my God, Kell!’ Hearing my name snaps me out of my daze, and I am suddenly aware that I am standing in a huge crush of people.

No. Not just people. Boys. And girls.

Uncured, all of them, without a hint of a blemish on their necks-at least the ones standing close enough for me to scope out. Children talking. Children laughing. Children sharing sips from the same cup. Suddenly,

I think I might faint.

Hanna is barreling toward me, elbowing people out of the way, and before I can even open my mouth, she is jumping on top of me as she did at graduation, squeezing me in a hug. I was so startled I stumbled backward, nearly falling over.



‘You’re here.’

She pulls away and stares at me, keeping her hands on my shoulders. ‘You’re here.’

Another song ends, and the lead singer -a tiny girl with long black hair- calls out something about a break. As my brain slowly reboots, I have the dumbest thought: She is even shorter than I am, and she is singing in front of five hundred people.

Then I think, five hundred people, five hundred people, what am I doing here with five hundred people?

‘I can’t stay,’ I say quickly. The moment the words are out of my mouth I feel relieved. Whatever I came here to prove has been proven; now I can go. I need to get out of this crowd, the babble of voices, a shifting wall of chests, and shoulders all around me. I was too wrapped up in the music earlier to look around, but now I have the sensation of colors and perfumes and hands twisting and turning around us.

‘Lena,’ she says, ‘this is my friend Drew.’ She looks guilty for just a second, but then the smile is back on her face, as wide as ever like we are standing in the middle of St. Paul’s talking about a bio quiz.

Hana opens her mouth- to object-but at that second, we are interrupted. A boy with dirty blond hair falling into his eyes pushes his way over to us, carrying two big plastic cups. The dirty-blond-hair boy passes a cup to Hana. She takes it, thanks to him, and then turns back to me.

~\*~

I open my mouth, but no words come out, which is a good thing, considering that there is a giant fire alarm going off in my head. It may sound stupid and naive, but not once when I

was heading to the farms did, I even consider that the party would be coed. It did not even occur to me.

Breaking curfew is one thing; listening to unapproved music is even worse. But breaking segregation laws is one of the worst offenses there is. Thus, Willow Marks early procedure and the graffiti scrawled on her house; thus, the fact that Chelsea Brown was kicked out of school after being found breaking curfew with a boy from Spencer, and her parents were mysteriously fired, and her whole family was forced to vacate their house. And- at least in Chelsea's case- there was not even any proof. Just a rumor going around.

Drew gives me a half-wave. 'Hey, Liv...'

My mouth opens and closes... Still no sound... For a second, we stand there in awkward silence. Then he extends a cup to me, a sudden, jerky gesture.

'Whiskey...?'

'Whiskey...?' I squeak back... I have only had alcohol a few times... At Christmas, when mom pours me a quarter glass of wine, and once at Hana's house when we stole some blackberry liqueur from her parent's liquor cabinet and drank until the ceiling started spinning overhead.

Hanna was laughing and giggling, but I did not like it, did not like the sweet sick taste in my mouth, or the way my thoughts seemed to break apart like a mist in the sun. Out of control- that is what it was, that is what I hated.

Drew shrugs. 'It is all they had.

Vodka always goes first at these things.' At this thing-as in, these things happen, as in, more than once.

'No.' I try to shove the cup back at him. 'Take it.'

He waves me away, obviously misunderstanding. 'It is cool. I will just get another.'

Drew smiles quickly at Hanna before disappearing into the crowd. I like his smile, the way it rises crookedly toward his left ear- but as I realize I am thinking about liking his smile, I feel the panic winging its way through me, beating through my blood, a lifetime of whispers and accusations.

Control. It is all about control.

'I have to go,' I managed to say to Hanna. Progress.

'Go?' She wrinkled her forehead up.

'You walk out here-'

'I biked.'

I pretend to shiver so she does not feel bad, wondering why it feels so awkward to talk to her. This is my best friend, the girl I have known since second grade, the girl who used to split her cookies with me at lunch, and once put her fist in Jillian Dawson's face after Jillian said my family was diseased.

'I'm tired,' I say. 'And I shouldn't be here.' I want to say, you should not be here either, but I will stop myself.

'Whatever, you bike out here and then you're just going to go?'

Hanna reaches for my hand, but I cross my arms quickly to avoid her. She looks momentarily hurt.

Part: 7

Gracelessness

'Did you hear the band? They are amazing, aren't they?' Hanna's being too nice, un- Hanna, and I feel a deep, sharp pain

in my ribs. She is trying to be polite. She is acting like we are strangers. She feels the awkwardness too.

'I- I wasn't listening.' For some reason, I do not want Hanna to know that yes, I heard, and yes, I thought they were amazing, better than amazing.

It is too private- embarrassing even, something to be ashamed of, and even though I came to Roaring Brooke Farms, and broke curfew and everything, just to see her and apologize, the feeling- I had earlier today returns to me: I do not know Hanna anymore, and she does not know me.

I am used to a feeling of double-ness, of thinking one thing and having to do another, a constant tug-of-war. But somehow Hanna has fallen cleanly away into the double half, the other world, the world of unmentionable thoughts and things and people.

Is it possible that all this time I have been living my life, studying for tests, taking long runs with Hana-and this other world has just existed, running alongside and underneath mine, alive, ready to sneak out of the shadows and the alleyways as soon as the sun goes down? Illegal parties, unapproved music, people touching one another with no fear of disease, with no fear for themselves.

A world without fear. Impossible.

And even though I am standing in the middle of the biggest crowd I have ever seen in my life; I suddenly feel very alone.

'Stay,' Hana says quietly. Even though it is a command, there is a hesitation in her voice, like she is asking a question.

'You can catch the second set.'

I shake my head. I wish I had not come.

I wish I had not seen this. I wish I did not know what I know now, could wake up tomorrow and ride over to Hanna's house could lie out at Eastern Prom with her and complain about how boring summers are like we always do.

I could believe that nothing had changed.

'I'm going to go,' I say, wishing my voice did not come out shaky. 'It is all right, though. You can stay.'

The second I say it; I realize she never offered to come back with me. She is looking at me with the weirdest mixture of regret and pity.

'I can come back with you if you want,' she says, but I can tell she is only offering now to make me feel better. 'No, no. I will be fine.' My cheeks are burning, and I take a step back, desperate to get out of there. I bump into someone-a boy who turns and smiles at me. I stepped quickly away from him.

'Lena, wait.' Hana goes to grab me again. Even though she already has a drink, I shove my cup in her free hand, so she must pause, momentarily frowning as she tries to juggle both drinks into the crook of an elbow, and in that second, I dance backward out of her reach.

'I will be fine, I promise. I will talk to you tomorrow.' Then I am slipping through a narrow space between two people- that is the only benefit of being five-two, you have a good vantage point on all the in-between spaces-and before I know it, Hana has dropped behind me, swallowed up by the crowd. I weave a path away from the barn, keeping my eyes down, hoping my cheeks cool off fast.

Images swirl by, a blur, making me feel like I am dreaming again. Boy. Girl.

Boy/Girl. Laughing, shoving each other, touching each other's hair. I've never, not once in my whole life, felt so different and out of place. There is a high, mechanized shriek, and then the band starts playing again, but this time the music does nothing for me. I do not even pause. I just keep walking, heading for the hill, imagining the cool silence of the starlit fields, the familiar dark streets of Pittsburgh, the regular rhythm of the patrols, marching quietly coordinated, the feedback from the regulators' walkie-talkies- regular, normal, familiar, mine.

Finally, the crowd starts thinning. It was hot, pressed up against so many people, and the breeze stings my skin, cools my cheeks. I started to calm down a little, and at the edge of the crowd, I allowed myself to look back at the stage. The barn, open to the sky and the night and glowing white with light, reminds me of a palm cupping a small bit of fire.

'Kellie!'

It is strange how I instantly recognize the voice even though I have heard it only once before, for ten minutes, fifteen tops -it is the laughter that runs underneath it, like someone leaning in to let you in on a good secret in the middle of a boring class.

My vision does its camera- zooming in focus again, and all I see is Ray, shouldering his way out of the crowd toward me.

'Liv! Wait!'

A brief flash of terror zips through me -for a wild second, I think he must be here as part of a patrol, as a raiding group or something- but then I see he is dressed normally, in jeans and his scuffed-up sneakers with the ink-blue laces and a faded T-shirt. Everything freezes...

The blood stops flowing in my veins, my breath stops coming also. For a second even the music falls away and all I hear is something steady and quiet and pretty, like the distant beat of a drum, and I am hearing my heart, except I know that is impossible because my heart has stopped too.

‘What are you doing here?’ I stammer out as he catches up with me.

He grins at me- ‘Nice to see you too.’

He has left a few feet of distance between us, and I am glad. In the half-light, I cannot make out the color of his eyes and I do not need to be distracted right now, do not need to feel the way I did at the labs when he leaned in to whisper to me- the total awareness of the bare inch that separated his mouth from my ear, terror, guilt, and excitement all at once.

‘I’m serious.’ I do my best to scowl at him.

‘But you can’t...’ I am struggling to find words, not sure how to say what I want to say. ‘But then again this is...’

‘Illegal...?’ He shrugs... His smile falters, though it does not disappear entirely. He blows air out of his lips. ‘I came to hear the music,’ he says. ‘Like everybody else.’

One strand of hair curls down over his left eye, and when he turns to scan the party, it catches the light from the stage and winks that crazy golden-brown color. ‘It’s okay,’ he says, quieter so that I must lean forward to hear him over the music.

‘Nobody’s hurting anybody.’

You do not know what I start to say, but the way his words are just edged with sadness stops me.

Part: 8

Snap

Olivia tweets- Tell me how pretty it is, #p\*ssy-pic.

Kiss me here Kellie...

He is only regretful for the things he lost after the cure. Music does not move people the same way, for example, and while he should have been cured of feelings of regret, too, the procedure works differently for everybody, and it is not always perfect. Ray runs a hand through his hair, and I make out the small, dark, three-pronged scar behind his left ear, perfectly symmetrical.

That is why my aunt and uncle sometimes still dream. That is why my cousin Marcella used to find herself crying hysterically, with no warning or apparent cause.

‘So, what about you?’ He turns back to me, and the smile is on again, and the teasing, winking quality of his voice.

‘What’s your excuse?’

‘I didn’t want to come,’ I said quickly.

‘I had to-’ I break off, realizing I am not sure why I had to come. ‘I had to give something to someone,’ I say finally.

He raises his eyebrows, clearly unimpressed. I rush on, ‘To Hanna. My friend. You met her the other day.’

‘I remember,’ he says.

‘For standing me up.’ One corner of his mouth hitches higher, and again I have the feeling that he is sharing some delicious secret with me, that he is trying to tell me something. ‘You were a no-show at Back and Gold Cove that day.’



I have never seen anyone maintain a smile for so long. It is like his face is naturally molded that way. 'You haven't said you're sorry yet.'

'For what?' The crowd has continued to press closer to the stage, so Ray and I are no longer surrounded by people.

Occasionally, someone walks by, swinging a bottle of something or singing along, slightly off-key, but we are alone.

I felt a burst of triumph-he was waiting for me at Back and Gold Cove! He did want me to meet him! At the same time, anxiety blooms inside of me. He wants something from me. I am not sure what it is, but I can sense it, and it makes me afraid.

'So?' He folds his arms and rocks back on his heels, still smiling. 'Are you going to apologize, or what?'

His easiness and self-assurance aggravate me; just like they did at the labs. It is so unfair, so different from how I feel like I am about to have a heart attack or melt into a puddle.

'I don't apologize to liars,' I say, surprised by how steady my voice sounds.

He winces. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Come on.' I roll my eyes, feeling increasingly confident by the second. 'You lied about seeing me at evaluations. You lied about recognizing me.' I am ticking his lies off on my fingers. 'You lied about even being inside the labs on Evaluation Day.'

'Okay, okay.'

To keep the process 'pure' or something, I do not know. But I needed a cup of coffee, and there is this machine on the second floor of the C complex that has the good kind, with real milk and everything, so I used my cord to get in. He held up both hands.

‘I am sorry, okay? Look, I am the one who should apologize.’ He stares at me for a second and then sighs. ‘I told you; security is not allowed in the labs during evaluations. That is, it.

End of story.

And afterward, I had to lie about it. I could lose my job. And I only work at the stupid labs to subsidize my school -’ He trails off. For once he does not look confident. He looks worried like he is scared I might tell on him.

‘So why were you on the observation deck?’ I press on... ‘Why are you watching me?’

‘I didn’t even make it to the second floor,’ he says. He is staring at me closely, as though judging my reaction.

‘I came inside, and-and- I just heard this crazy noise. That rushing, roaring sound.

And something else, too. Screaming or something.’

I close my eyes briefly, recalling the feeling of the burning white lights, my impression of hearing the ocean pounding outside the labs, of hearing my mother scream across the distance of a decade. When I open them again, Ray is still watching me.

‘Anyway, I had no idea what was going on. I thought- I do not know, it is stupid, but I thought the labs were under attack or something. And then as I am standing there, suddenly there is, like, a hundred cows charging me.’ He shrugs. ‘There was a staircase to my left. I freaked out and booked it. Figured cows do not climb stairs.’ A smile appears again, this time fleeting, tentative. ‘I ended up on the observation deck.’

A perfectly normal, reasonable explanation. I feel relieved, and less frightened of him now. At the same time, something is working under my chest, a dull feeling, a disappointment.

And some stubbornness, a part of me that still doubts him. I remember the way he looked on the observation deck, head tilted back, laughing; the way he winked at me. The way he looked amused, confident, happy. Unafraid. A world without fear-

'So-o, you don't know anything about how-how it happened?' I cannot believe I am being so bold. I ball up my fists and squeeze, hoping he does not notice the sudden strangled sound of my voice.

'The mix-up in the deliveries, you mean?' He says it smoothly, without a pause or a break in his voice, and the last of my doubts vanish. Just like any cure, he does not question the official story. 'I was not in charge of signing deliveries that day. The guy who was- Sal-was fired. You are supposed to check the cargo. He skipped that step.' He cocks his head to one side, spreads his hands. 'Satisfied now?'

'Satisfied,' I say. But the pressure in my chest is still there. Even though earlier I was desperate to be out of the house, now I just wish I could blink and be home, sitting up in bed, pushing the covers off my legs, realizing that everything-the party, seeing Ray- was a dream.

'So -?' He tilts his head back toward the barn. The band is playing something loud and fast-paced. I do not know why the music appealed to me before. It just seems like noise now-rushing noise. 'Think we can get closer without getting trampled?'

I ignore the fact that he has just said 'we,' a word that for some reason sounds amazingly appealing when pronounced with his lilting, laughing accent. 'Actually, I was just heading home.' I realize I am angry at him without knowing why for not being what I thought he was, I guess, even though I should be grateful that he is normal, and cured, and safe.

'Heading home?' he repeats disbelievingly. 'You can't go home.' I have always been careful not to let myself give in to feelings of anger or irritation. I cannot afford to stay at Carol's house. I owe her too much and besides, after the few tantrums I threw as a child, I hated the way she looked at me sideways for days, as though analyzing me, measuring me. I knew she was thinking, just like her mother. But now I give in, let the anger surge. I am sick of people acting like this world, this other world, is the normal one, while I am the freak. It is not fair: like all the rules have suddenly been changed and somebody forgot to tell me.

'I can, and I am.' I turn around and start heading up the hill, figuring he will leave me alone. To my surprise, he does not.

'Wait!' He comes bounding up the hill after me.

'What are you doing?' I whirl around to face him again, surprised by how confident I sound, considering that my heart is rushing, tumbling.

This is the secret to talking to boys-you just must be angry all the time.

'What do you mean?' We are both slightly out of breath from hoofing it up the hill, but he still manages to smile. 'I just want to talk to you.'

'You're following me.' I cross my arms, which helps me feel as though I am closing off space between us. 'You're

following me again.' There it is... He starts backward, and I get a momentary, sick twinge of pleasure, that I have surprised him. 'Again...?' He repeats... I am glad that for once, I am not the one stuttering, or struggling to find words.

The words fly out: 'I think it's a little bit strange that I go my whole life without seeing you, and then suddenly I start seeing you everywhere.' I had not planned to say this-it had not struck me as strange-but the second the words are out of my mouth I realize they are true.

He is going to be angry, but to my surprise he tips his head back and laughs, long and loud, moonlight turning the curve of his cheeks and chin and nose silver. I am so surprised by his reaction I just stand there, staring at him. Finally, he looks at me. Even though I still cannot make out his eyes-the moon draws everything starkly, highlighting it in bright, crystalline silver or leaving it in blackness- I have the impression of heat, and light, the same impression I had that day at the labs.

'Maybe you just haven't been paying attention,' he says quietly, rocking forward slightly on his heels.

I take an unconscious, half-shuffling step backward. I find myself frightened by his closeness; by the fact that even though our bodies are separated by several inches I feel as though we are touching.

'What-what do you mean?'

'I mean that you're wrong.' He pauses, watching me, and I struggle to keep my face composed, even though I can feel my left eye straining and fluttering. Hopefully, in the darkness, he cannot tell. 'We've seen each other plenty.'

Part: 9

Immature

'I would remember if we'd met before.'

'I didn't say that we'd met.' He does not try to close the new distance between us, and I am grateful, at least, for that. He chews on the corner of a lip-a gesture that makes him look younger.

'Let me ask you a question,' he goes on.

'How come you do not run past the Governor anymore?'

Without meaning to, I gasp a little.

'How do you know about the Governor?'

'I take classes at IUP,' he says.

I remember the University of Pittsburgh-I remember now, the afternoon we walked up to see the ocean from the back of the lab complex, hearing bits of his conversation floating back to me on the wind. He did say he was a student. 'I worked at the Grind last semester, in Monument Square. I used to see you all the time.' My mouth opens and shuts. No words come out; my brain goes on lockdown whenever I need it the most.

Of course, I know the Grind; Hana and I used to run past it two, three times a week, watching the college students float in and out like drifting snowflakes, blowing the steam from the top of their cups. The Grind looks out onto a small square, all cobblestone, called Monument Square: It marks the halfway point of one of the six-mile routes I used to do all the time.

In its center is a statue of a man, half-eroded from snow and weather, and scrawled over with a few looping curls of graffiti. He is striding forward, one hand holding his hat on his

head so that it looks like he is walking through a horrible storm or a headwind. His other fist is extended in front of him. It is obvious that he was, in the distant past, holding something-a torch- but at some point, that portion of the statue was broken or stolen. So now the Governor strides forward with an empty fist, a circular hole cut in his hand, a perfect hiding place for notes and secret stuff.

Hanna and I and she used to check his fist sometimes, to see if there was anything good inside. Nonetheless, there were not just a few pieces of wadded-up chewing gum and some coins.

Part: 10

Infidelities

(Past- chatting)

I never got this by liv like to cummie- with little- no make on- or not fixed up not like pride- and sh\*t- for she said, 'Like kar- if a boy wants to see me cummie- he- we must love me like this... I am doing this at home in my room- like the way I want too. They will look regardless.' Not me at all in my thinking- but okay.

#- Hashtag: (Girlie talk'n)

(Now)

I do not know when Hana and I started calling him the Governor, or why. The wind and rain rubbed the plaque at the base of the statue indecipherable. No one else calls him that. Everyone else just says, 'The statue at Monument Square.' Ray must have overheard us talking about the Governor one day.

Ray is still looking at me, waiting, and I realize, I never answered his question. 'I have to switch my routes up,' I say, I

have not run past the Governor since March or April. 'It gets boring.' And then, because I cannot help it,

I squeak out, 'You remember me?'

He laughs... 'You were hard to miss. You used to run around the statue and do this jumping, whooping thing.' Heat creeps up my neck and cheeks. I must be going a deep red again, and I thank God for the fact that we have moved away from the stage lights. I completely forgot; I used to jump up and try to high-five the Governor as Hanna and I and she ran past, a way of psyching myself up for the run back to school.

Sometimes we would even scream out, 'Halena!' We must have looked completely crazy.

'I don't-' I lick my lips, fumbling for an explanation that will not sound ridiculous. 'When you run you sometimes do weird things. Because of the endorphins. It is like a drug, you know. Messes with your brain.'

'I liked it,' he says. 'You looked -' He trails off for a moment. His face contracts slightly, a tiny shift I can barely make out in the dark, but in that second, he looks so still and sad it almost takes my breath away, like he is a statue or a different person. I am afraid he will not finish his sentence, but then he says, 'You looked happy.'

For a second, we just stood there in silence. Then, suddenly, Ray is back, easy, and smiling again. 'I left a note for you one time. In the Governor's fist, you know?'

I left a note for you once. It is impossible, too crazy to think about, and I hear myself repeating, 'You left a note for me?'

'I am sure it said something stupid. Just hi, and a smiley face, and my name. But then you stopped coming.' He shrugs.



'It is still there. The note, I mean. Just a bit of paper pulp by now.'

He left me a note. He left me a note. For me. The idea-the fact of it, the fact that he even noticed and thought about me for more than one second is huge and overwhelming, makes my legs go tingly and my hands feel numb.

And then I am frightened. This is how it starts. Even if he is cured, even if he is safe-the fact is, I am not safe, and this is how it starts. Phase One: preoccupation; difficulty focusing; dry mouth; perspiration, sweaty palms; dizziness, and disorientation. I feel a rushing blend of sickness and relief, a feeling like finding out that everyone knows your worst secret and has known all along. And the thing, the disease, is inside of me, ready at any moment to start working on my insides, to start poisoning me.

All this time mom was right, my teachers were right, my cousins were right. I am just like my mother.

'I have to go.' I start up the hill again, nearly sprinting now, but again he comes after me.

'Hey. Not so fast.' At the top of the hill, he reaches out and puts a hand on my wrist to stop me. His touch burns, and I jerk away quickly. 'Lena. Hold on a second.'

Even though I know I should not, I stop.

It is the way he says my name: like music.

'You do not have to be worried, okay? You do not have to be scared.' His voice is twinkling again. 'I'm not flirting with you.' My mind is spinning blindly in a panic, and I realize I do not even know what flirting is. I just know about it from textbooks; I just know that it is bad. Is it possible to flirt without knowing you are flirting? Is he flirting? My left eye goes full flutter.

‘Relax,’ he says, holding up both hands, a gesture like, do not be mad at me. ‘I was kidding.’ He turns just slightly to the left, watching me the whole time.

Part: 11

Like her stupid

Liv’s- nip is hanging out like her stupid!

Awkwardness sweeps through me.

Flirting. A dirty word. He thinks he is flirting. ‘I’m not- I don’t think you were- I would never think that you-’ The words collide in my mouth, and now I know there is no amount of darkness that can cover the rush of red to my face.

He cocks his head to the side. ‘Are you flirting with me, then?’

‘What? No,’ I splutter.

The moon lights up his three-pronged scar vividly: a perfect white triangle, a scar that makes you think of order and regularity. ‘I am safe, remember? I cannot hurt you.’

He says it quietly, evenly, and I believe him. As well yet my heart will not stop its frantic winging in my chest, spinning higher and higher, until I am sure it is going to carry me off. I feel the way I do whenever I get to the top of the Hill and can see back down Legislature Street, with the whole of Pitt. lying behind me, the streets a shimmer of greens and grays-from a distance, both beautiful and unfamiliar-just before I spread my arms and let go, trip, and skip and run down the hill, wind whipping in my face, not even trying to move, just letting gravity pull me.

Breathless; excited; waiting for the drop.

I suddenly realized how quiet it is.

The band stopped playing, and the crowd went silent too. The only sound is the wind shushing over the grass. From where we are, fifty feet past the crest of the hill, the barn, and the party are invisible. I have a brief fantasy that we are the only two people out in the darkness, that we are the only two people awake and alive in the city, in the world.

Then soft strands of music begin to weave themselves up in the air, gentle, sighing, so quiet at first, I confuse the sounds for the wind. This music is different from the music that was playing earlier soft, and fragile, as though each note is spun glass, or silken thread, looping up and back into the night air.

Once again, I am struck by how beautiful it is, as nothing- I have ever heard, and out of nowhere, I am overwhelmed by the dual desire to laugh and cry.

‘This song is my favorite.’ A cloud skitters across the moon, and shadows dance over Ray's face. He is still staring at me, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. ‘Have you ever danced?’ ‘No,’ I say, a little too forcefully.

He laughs softly. ‘It is okay. I will not tell you.’

Images of my mother: the softness of her hands as she spun me down the long-polished wood floors of our house, as though we were ice-skaters; the fluted quality of her voice as she sang along to the songs piping from the speakers, laughing. ‘My mother used to dance,’ I say. The words slip out, and I regret them instantly.

But then again, Ray does not question me or laugh.

He keeps watching me progressively. For a moment he seems on the edge of saying anything at all. But then he just holds out his hand to me across space, across the dark.

‘Would you like to?’ He says... His voice is hardly audible above the wind so low it is barely a whisper.

‘Would I like to do what?’

Part: 12

Interrogations

Impersonal words from Liv-

MFC- Silly boy question: ‘So-o Liv- when did you become a smart ass...?’

She said back- ‘When I became smart and found out I had an ass!’

Kisses... (Do you want to suck on my candy cane?)

My heart is roaring, rushing in my ears, and though there are still several inches between his hand and mine, there is a zipping, humming energy that connects us, and from the heat flooding my body you would think we were pressed together, palm to palm, face to face.

‘Dance,’ he says, at the same time closing those last few inches, finding my hand, and pulling me closer, and at that second the song hits a high note and I confuse the two impressions, of his hand and the soaring, the lifting of the music.

We dance...

Most things, even the greatest movements on earth, have their beginnings in something small. An earthquake that shatters a city might begin with a tremor, a tremble, a breath.

Music begins with a vibration. The flood that rushed into Pitt twenty years ago after two months of straight rain, that hurtled up beyond the labs and damaged more than a thousand

houses, swept up tires and trash bags and old, smelly shoes and floated them through the streets like prizes, that left a thin film of green mold behind, a stench of rotting and decay that did not go away for months, began with a trickle of water, no wider than a finger, lapping up onto the docks. And God created the whole universe from an atom no bigger than thought.

Grace's life fell apart because of a single word: sympathizer. My world exploded because of a different word: suicide.

Correction: That was the first time my world exploded.

The second time my world exploded, it was also because of a word. A word that worked its way out of my throat and danced into and out of my lips before I could think about it or stop it.

The question was: Will you meet me tomorrow?

And the word was: Yes.

Part: 13

Ecstasy

Karly- periods of euphoria; hysterical laughter and heightened energy periods of despair; lethargy changes in appetite; rapid weight loss or weight gain fixation; loss of other interests compromised reasoning skills; distortion of reality disruption of sleep patterns; insomnia or constant fatigue obsessive thoughts and actions paranoia; insecurity difficulty breathing pain in the chest, throat, or stomach difficulty swallowing; refusal to eat complete breakdown of rational faculties; erratic behavior; violent thoughts and fantasies; hallucinations and delusions emotional or physical paralysis (partial or total)

## Death-

If you fear that you or someone you know may have contracted deliria, please call the emergency line toll-free at 1-800PRECLUDE to discuss immediate intake and treatment.

I would never have understood how Hana could lie so often and so easily. But just like anything else, lying becomes easier the more you do it. Therefore, when I get home from work the next day, Carol asks me whether I do not mind having hot dogs for the fourth straight night in a row... (The result of a shipment surplus at the Save a lot; we once went a whole two weeks having baked beans every day.)

I say that Kellie from St. Paul has invited me, and some other girls over for dinner. I do not even have to think about it. The lie just comes. Besides, I still feel sweat pricking up under my palms, my voice stays calm, and I am sure my face keeps its normal color because Carol just gives me one of her flitting smiles and says that that sounds nice. At six-thirty I got on my bike and headed to North End Beach, where Ray and I plus she agreed to meet.

There are plenty of beaches in Pitt. North End Beach is one of the least popular-which, of course, made it one of my mother's favorites. The current is stronger there than it is at Moon Shoreline or Sunset Park. I am not exactly sure why. I do not mind. I have always been a strong swimmer. After that first time when my mother released her arms from around my waist and I felt both the surging panic and the thrill, the enthusiasm- I learned quickly, and by four I was paddling out by myself past the breaks.

There are other reasons why most people avoid the North End Coastline, even though it is only a short walk down the hill from Eastern Prom, one of the most popular parks. The beach is nothing more than a short strip of rocky, gravel flecked

sand. It backs up against the far side of the lab complex, where the storage and waste sheds are, which does not make for particularly pretty scenery. And when you swim out at the East End riverside you get a clear view of Yellow Bridge and the wedge of unregulated land between Pittsburgh and Yarmouth... A lot of people do not like being so close to the Wilds. It makes them nervous. It makes me nervous too, except that there is a part of me- a tiny, a little flick of a part-that likes it. For a while, after my mom died, I used to have these fantasies that she was not dead, really, and that my father was not dead either- that they had run away to the Wilds to be together.

Part: 14

Unrealities

He had gone five years before her, to prepare everything, to build a little house with a woodstove and furniture hewed from tree branches. At some point, I imagined they would come back and get me. I even imagined my room down to the smallest detail: a dark red carpet, a little red and green patchwork quilt, a red chair.

I had the fantasy only a few times before I realized how wrong it was. If my parents had escaped to the Wilds, it would have made them sympathizers, resisters. It was better than they were dead. Besides, I learned quickly that my fantasies about the Wilds were just that-make-believe, little kiddie stuff.

She says that is why the government does not bother doing anything about them, does not even acknowledge their survival.

They will die out soon enough, all of them, freeze or starve or just let the disease run its course, turn them against each other, have them raging and belligerent and clawing one another's eyes out.

The Invalids have nothing, no way of trading or getting red patchwork quilts or chairs, or anything else for that matter. She said that it has already transpired- she said the backwoods might be empty now, dark, and dead, full of only the rustle and whispers of animals.

Hanna once told me that they must live like animals, filthy, hungry, desperate.

She is right about the other stuff-about the Invalids living like animals-but she is wrong about that. They are alive, and out there, and they do not want us to forget it. That is why they stage the demonstrations.

That is why they let the cows loose in the labs. I am not jumpy until I get to East End Beach. Even though the sun is sinking behind me, it lights the water white and makes everything sparkle. I shield my eyes from the glare and spot Ray down by the water, a long black brushstroke against all that blue. I flashback to last night, to the fingers of one of his hands just hard- pressed against my lower back, so lightly it was like I was only dreaming of them-the other hand cupping mine, dry and encouraging as a piece of wood warmed by the sun.

We danced, too, the dancing that people do at their wedding after the pairing has been formalized, but better somehow, looser, and less abnormal.

He has his back toward me, facing the ocean, and I am glad. I feel self-conscious as I- trudge down the wobbly, salt-warped stairs that lead from the parking lot to the beach, pausing to unlace and kick off my sneakers, which I carry in one hand.

The sand is warm on my bare feet as I set off toward him.



An old man is coming up from the water, carrying a fishing pole. He shoots me a suspicious glance, then turns to stare at Ray, then looks at me again and frowns. I open my mouth to say, 'He's cured,' but the man just grunts at me as he walks past, and I cannot imagine he would bother to call the regulators, so I do not say anything.

Not that we would get in trouble if we were caught-that is what Ray meant when he said, 'I'm safe'-but I do not want to answer a lot of questions and have my ID number run through SVS and all of that. Besides, if the regulators did haul ass out to North End Coastline to check out 'suspicious behavior,' only to discover it was some cured taking pity on a seventeen-year-old nobody, they would be annoyed-and guaranteed to take it out on someone. Taking pity. I push the words out of my mind quickly, surprised by how difficult it is to even think of them.

All day I tried not to worry about why Ray would be so nice to me. I even imagined-for one brief, stupid second -that after my evaluation I would get matched with him. I had to shunt that thought aside too.

~\*~

Night-

Freak me with her I said,' I said, giving him approval, taking him into my flesh, a soft offer to lunacy. My knees were weak, but he held me with one hand, managing me with the motion of his hips. I was entirely his to do what he wanted, and he knew it and I was going to give it more than her. I no longer believed in the idea of soul mates, or love at first sight. But then again, I began to believe that a very few times in your life, if you were lucky, you might meet a celebrity who was exactly right for you.

Not because he was perfect, or because you were, but because your combined flaws were arranged in a way that allowed two separate beings to hinge together. Done- I feel- I think you still love me, but we cannot escape the fact that I am not enough for you. I knew this was going to happen.

So-o I am not accusing you of falling in love with another girl. I am not angry, either. I should be, but I am not.

I just feel pain... a lot of pain. I thought I could envision how much this would hurt, but I was wrong so wrong, what am I the one that was wrong or you? I will love you always. When this red hair is white, I will still love you.

When the smooth softness of youth is replaced by the delicate softness of age, I will still want to touch your skin. When your face is full of the lines of every smile you have ever smiled, of every surprise I have seen flash through your eyes when every tear you have ever cried has left its mark upon your face, I will treasure you even more, because I was there to see it all. I will share your life with you, HANNA not KELLIE, and I will love you until the last breath leaves your body or mine.

My story ended that day- she started.

I was done with the three-way cheating.

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Part: 15

Semi-kaput

He never really loved me or her or anybody- when we are half-finished, we are always searching for somebody to complete us.

When, after a few years or a few months of an association, we find that we are still exasperated, we blame our

partners and take up somebody more promising. This can go on and on- series two-timing- pending we acknowledge that while a partner can add sweet magnitudes to our lives, we, each of us, are responsible for our fulfillment.

An insignificant person can offer it to us, and to have faith in or else delude ourselves treacherously and to database for eventual failure every relationship we enter... it was just sex- no love.

That is why I ended it- or did I?

Or did he just want her?

Ernest Hemingway said- 'The most painful thing is losing yourself in the process of loving someone too much and forgetting that you are special too.'

So right on- right? Every couple needs to argue now and then. Just to prove that the relationship is strong enough to survive. Long-term relationships, the ones that matter, are all about weathering the peaks and the valleys. Well, I have come back I do not know, should I stay, or should I go? What do you think I do well and what should I do?

I am smarter than her- and her and she too so you know what I will do.

Ray has already received his printed sheet, his recommended matches-he would have gotten it even before his cure, directly after the evaluations. He is not married yet because he is still in school, end of the story. But he will be as soon as he finishes.

~*~

It was just a fight- but it is me or her... He loves me only. We waste time looking for the perfect lover, instead of creating

the perfect love. So, I will stay and take the freaking in the ass-like always.

Love- with him is better than none in high school- no?

Love is the answer, but while you are waiting for the answer, sex raises someone's loser feelings...

I went there for a week with the breakup- so yes you would do me too.

No hugging back just the nighttime friend- like before I was a teen girl- I am going to do this if I am not that girl.

I caught myself thinking about falling in love with someone whom I hoped was out there right now, unthinking about the possibility of me, but I quickly expatriated the notion. It was that kind of thinking that landed me in this situation, to begin with. Hope can ruin you. And it is not him any longer.

Do you see why?

Part: 16

Panties

Photo of me saying 'MFC girl with my green and white panties'- showing the text that said: 'SEE ME P*SSY!' ~ Past remembers of Karly ~

Kellie age 10- I am coming so hard! Like- um- ah-oh-ah- using my hair pink bush with my name on it, you do need one like this for this, mom and dad do get it- and it is on my dresser. I am not for my hair anymore, on my back and my knees up and down in and out I go, squirting and thick stuff too. Mum- yah!

You see me soloing for your baby.

My sis did this on cam, so she did not have to work at some fry- hole only making \$2.00 an hour, when playing with her hole she made- sh*t loads- I do it for me... like this.

And so, can you, like- it is safe. If I want, I can take cell vids and give them to my boyfriends... just say. That is up to you, but they love it.

Maybe were gay so we did have to bang a boy three times a day yet still be the popular girls. Bi girls yes- you can call us that. that high school finding yourself and feeling out others.

Of course, then I started wondering about the kind of girl he has been matched with-someone like Hanna, I decided, with bright blond hair and an irritating ability to make even pulling her hair into a ponytail look graceful, like a choreographed dance.

There are four other people on the beach: a mother and a child, one hundred feet away, the mother sitting in a faded fabric folding chair, staring blankly toward the horizon, while the child- who is no more than three- toddlers in the waves, gets knocked over, lets out a shriek (of pain? pleasure?) and struggles back to her feet. 'Any fool can know. The point is to understand.'

Okay is it okay not to get it in high school then?

For I do not yet I have to.

'Hi,' he says. 'I'm glad you came.'

I feel shy again, stupid holding my ratty shoes in one hand. I can feel my cheeks getting hot, so I look down, drop my shoes, turn them over once in the sand with my toe. 'I said I would, didn't I?'

I do not mean for the words to come out so harshly and I wince, psychologically cursing myself. It is like there is a filter set up in my brain, except instead of making things better, it twists everything around so what comes out of my mouth is wrong, different from what I was thinking.

~*~

Further, then, a couple is walking, a man and a woman, not touching. They must be married. Both have their hands clasped in front of them, and both look straight ahead, not talking and not smiling, either, but calm, as though they are each surrounded by an invisible protective bubble.

Then I come up behind Ray and he turns and sees me, smiles. The sun catches his hair, turning it momentarily white. Then it smolders back to its normal golden-brown color.

Thankfully, Ray laughs. 'I just meant that you stood me up last time,' he says.

He nods toward the sand. 'Sit?'

'Sure,' I say, relieved. I feel much less awkward once we are both settled in the sand. There is less chance of falling over or doing something dumb. I draw my legs up to my chest, resting my chin on my knees. Ray leaves a good two or three feet of space between us.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. At first, I am searching for something to say. Every beat of silence seems to stretch into infinity, and I am sure Ray must think I am a mute.

But then he flicks a half-buried seashell out of the sand and hurls it into the ocean, and I realize he is comfortable at all.

I went back to be the loser girl- then freaking an asshole- I AM DONE!

Looser that is me... hope your happy Ray- you did this to me in the halls.